

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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In this Issue:

BRETT HALLIDAY
RICHARD DEMING
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

NOVEMBER, 1971
VOL. 29, NO. 6

DEATH WORE A BRIDAL VEIL

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Unarmed, helpless, Mike Shayne crouched in the darkness, waiting for a killer to strike. For perhaps the first time he had made a bad mistake—and in his game the first mistake usually is the last! But, at least, he had one last gamble left.

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Taunting, evil, the voice came from the darkness. "You're a good man, Mike Shayne. Too bad you must die like this."



DEATH WORE A BRIDAL VEIL

by
Brett
Halliday

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL



FOR MIKE SHAYNE, at first, there was nothing. Nothing but the blackness that was around and over him, blotting out all conscious thought.

Then the pain came. Faintly insistent at first, then almost immediately burgeoning into waves of agony that made him clench his jaws, stifling the groan that would betray his hiding place.

Mike Shayne had made few mistakes in his career. This was a bad one indeed, and it might well cost him his life. Somehow, out of sheer carelessness, he had let himself be

suckered, an open target for a karate attack which had paralyzed vital nerve ends and left him almost helpless.

With returning consciousness came clear realization. The redhead nodded, knowing exactly what the score was. That attack had been brutally expert in its execution. No one but a black belt karate killer could have done it. The next encounter would be the nitty-gritty and probably mean his death.

As if reading his thoughts, a voice came mockingly out of the darkness. "With your gun, you

would have been tough. Without it, you are as nothing in my hands."

A pause, and then: "You are a good man, Mike Shayne. It is too bad you have to die like this."

The big redhead cursed silently. It was indeed tough enough to die like this, like a cornered rat in a rich old fool's garret. It was a hell of a way to go. Grimly, both to flog his returning senses and to keep away the panic which gnawed at him, he forced himself to reconstruct the situation which had led him here.

There had been this broad and her silly, love-starved mother whom he was to protect. There had been a fat retainer. His first assignment was to go to a dance which the old dame was giving.

He nodded again.

Yes, that was it. The goddam dance . . .

* * *

I

THE WEDDING was the next to the biggest social event the golden resort city of Miami Beach had ever seen.

It cost the new Mrs. Dominique (Dom) Casale more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The flowers banked about the church cost fifteen thousand seven hundred and fifty-three dollars for just one item.

At the reception there was a bar

one hundred and ten feet long with fifteen bartenders struggling to keep up with the thirsts of the titillated wedding guests. They boasted that every known variety of liquor and all the best wines were there for the asking.

Among the drinkers were heirs of five of the country's ten largest fortunes, three British dukes, a Spanish grandee and a French prince, not to count a mixed handful of oriental potentates and three bishops.

The bride was Mrs. Erma Robertson Hicks Smithwick Kahn Casale — that is to say, she was also Mrs. Dom Casale number nine and one of the wealthiest women between the North and South Poles. She was madly in love with Dom. All his wives were on the wedding day and for some weeks or months thereafter. She meant to have the gaudiest, most expensive, most memorable wedding in the whole history of the institution of matrimony, and no doubt came close to realizing that ambition.

When she and Dom Casale came down the aisle from the altar her face was radiant. His, behind the luxuriant blue-black beard which gave him his nickname, was as inscrutable as always.

At just that moment Mrs. Dom Casale number four was sitting in the bedroom of her expensive summer home in North Carolina. From the window she could look out over a magnificent sweeping panorama of mountain and forest.

On the color television set in the bedroom she could watch the coast-to-coast broadcast of the wedding in Miami Beach.

She was actually watching, sadly and with some surprise, the crimson pool of blood flowing over her gown from her own severed wrist arteries.

The razor with which she had cut her wrists lay on the rug.

After a little while her eyes closed forever.

Mrs. Casale number three was in slightly less luxurious surroundings at the time. Her room was beautifully furnished and the windows looked out over park-like lawns.

Unfortunately, the view had to be seen through bars and the door to the expensive suite could be opened only from the outside. *Elm View* was not a hotel, but an expensive and highly regarded institution for the treatment of "nervous and mental disorders."

At the moment these facts did not bother Mrs. Casale. She was looking at a small, crudely fashioned mannikin of twisted rags. On the front of what would have been its shirt she had printed the letters DOM in lipstick. Every few seconds she selected a new portion of the anatomy of the doll and thrust in a pin.

At the thought of what the voodoo pin was supposed to be doing to the bridegroom of the day, Mrs. Casale smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile to see.



When the attendant brought her lunch she was very careful to hide the little doll and its considerable garniture of pins. She wanted out of *Elm View* and the doctors might misunderstand what she'd been doing.

Knowing Dom Casale's Central American background and upbringing she was sure that he'd understand perfectly. He'd know — and that was really all that counted.

She smiled at the thought of where some of the pins had been placed.

"A fine wedding night they'll have," she told the little doll.

Mrs. Casale number seven was more practical. She didn't bother to watch the broadcast or read the accounts splashed across the front page of the society section of her newspaper.

If anyone had asked her, she'd have said, "Why bother to rub salt in the wound?" Why indeed!

She did stop by her local sporting goods store and picked up a box of cartridges for the revolver her first husband had left when he died.

Then she called the airport and made reservations for a flight to Miami at a future date.

She checked her bank balance carefully. If she cut down on clothes for the next few months, she'd just about be able to afford the trip.

Number seven hadn't been quite as rich as the others. When Dom Casale had finished with her money there hadn't been a great deal left.

Sometimes she wondered why Dom had bothered to marry her at all. Had he been especially hard up at the time and willing to settle for less than the usual fortune he demanded for marriage?

Had his information been faulty so that he actually had overestimated her financial resources? Unlikely.

Had he just wanted her a little more than he had the others? He was capable of wanting a woman, even if not of love.

She felt the weight of the box of cartridges she'd just bought. They made her bag very heavy.

"It really won't matter much longer why he married me," she thought to herself "Not for much longer."

II

MIKE SHAYNE hadn't paid any attention to the Dom Casale wedding.

Tim Rourke was there, but then Shayne's old friend was an ace feature writer for the *Miami News*, and big society weddings were all in the day's work for him. Rourke was

pretty blasé about this sort of thing. That is, he thought he was. The latest Casale wedding was the most lavish he'd ever encountered. He particularly appreciated the hundred foot international bar.

Shayne's beautiful secretary-assistant Lucy Hamilton wasn't at the wedding, but she did watch the color teevy broadcast.

"Those gowns," she said to her boss, "and the jewels. There must be a hundred million dollars worth of dresses and jewelry in that church right now."

Mike Shayne was busy writing up the report of an investigation he'd just completed for one of the insurance firms which kept the big private detective on retainer. He only half heard her.

"It's a good thing nobody tries to hijack the joint," he said over his shoulder.

"I'm ashamed of you, Michael." Lucy said, still watching the broadcast. "Hijack a church. What an absolutely awful idea. If they did, though, it wouldn't do any good at all. Off on the left of the screen I see Petey Painter and about six of his men. He's probably got half his force staked out around there someplace right now."

Shayne grunted. Then he looked over at her and grinned.

"I'm sure he does, Angel," he said. "As dumb as Petey is, though, I'll bet I could heist that place before he ever knew it'd been hit."

Haven't you got anything better to do than watch that bunch?"

"Be still," she said. "This is a real education. The clothes these women are wearing are day after tomorrow's fashions. No woman in her right mind would miss seeing this."

The camera shifted to show the wedded pair coming back down the aisle from the altar.

"She's beautiful," Lucy said.

"She can afford to be."

She ignored him. "Michael, I look at him and it gives me the shivers. They all say he's so handsome, but he isn't to me. I don't think he's handsome."

"See that you don't," Shayne said over his shoulder. "From what I hear that guy is real bad medicine."

THE CASALE-HICKS nuptials had been celebrated on the eighth of June.

It was July fifteenth, about ten o'clock of a beautiful golden Florida day when the young woman came to Mike Shayne's office on Flagler Street.

She was not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old. A long-legged blonde with all the right curves in precisely the right places and a simple summer dress and accessories that had cost over a thousand dollars and boasted the label of one of the proudest Paris fashion houses.

Her face was an angelic oval, framed in long blonde hair. Only

the eyes were older than the rest of her. The eyes were bright and cynical and very much alive. It was the eyes that made her a real sophisticate instead of just one more of those great big beautiful dolls.

"I need your help," she said. "I need the best detective in the world, Mr. Shayne, and that's exactly what some of my friends say you are."

"Your friends are very kind," Shayne said noncommittally.

"They also say you're the most expensive man in the business," she said.

"Does that upset you?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I mean business, Mr. Shayne. To prove it I'm willing to pay you twice whatever your regular fees are. That and a bonus, if only you can help me. I have the money. I don't even have to ask what your fees are."

"You interest me," Shayne said. "Indeed you do." He signaled Lucy Hamilton to get her pad and take the conversation down in shorthand. "Just what sort of trouble are you in, Miss . . . ?"

"Miss Hicks," she said. "Irene Hicks, Mr. Shayne. I'm not in any trouble at all. At least not personally I'm not, if you understand me."

Shayne leaned back in his oversized swivel chair and lit a long, thin cigar rolled to his order in Little Havana. "Suppose you spell it out for me."

"Doesn't the name Irene Hicks mean anything to you?"

"No."

"It does to me," Lucy Hamilton said. "Wasn't it your mother who recently married the famous Dom Casale on Miami Beach? You remember the wedding, Michael."

The girl shot Lucy a smile. It wasn't exactly cheery, but it was a smile.

"That's it," she said. "You must have read the papers. How did the New York tabloids put it now? Bluebeard's Ninth Bride? Yes, I think that was it."

If Mike Shayne was expected to comment on that he disappointed her by holding his peace and waiting for her to continue. After a moment she did so.

"Surely," she said, "you must know Dom Casale's reputation."

"That's a safe bet," Shayne said.

Everybody in the country with any claim at all to literacy knew something about Dominique Casale. "The Marrying Latin," they called him, or "The Prince of Playboys." Because of the luxuriant black beard he wore, and sometimes because of more sinister rumors which somehow clung to his name, the more sensational magazines and papers had taken to calling his "Bluebeard" Casale.

He came from some place south of the border. He never said exactly where he was born or who his father was. He was blessed with tireless vigor, unmatchable tigerish good luck and most of all by an apparently insatiable lust for women and money.

His first wife had been a fading movie star at least twice his age. The following eight were all widows or daughters-and-heirs to eight of the richest men in the world.

Casale set his sights high. He looked for the woman with beauty and great fortune. Then he wooed and won her. When the marriage ended the bridegroom always managed to have taken or spent the vast bulk of his wife's money. It was a routine of apparently endless golden success.

Only the brides didn't seem to come out happy in the end. Of the first eight two were dead, one by suicide and one as the result of a drunken "accident." Two others had been ruled insane. None of the other four were happy or fortunate women.

Irene Hicks' mother was number nine.

All of this went through Mike Shayne's head as he waited for the girl to explain herself further. When she didn't, he himself broke the silence.

"I'd think the time to have worried about your mother was before she married him, not after the ceremony."

"Don't think I didn't," Irene said. "I tried everything I could think of to keep her from marrying him. I did everything but get down on my knees and beg her to wait. No use."

"It seldom is," Lucy Hamilton said. "People never listen to their own families."

"I didn't stop there," Irene said. "I had him investigated. I had proof he's no good. She wouldn't even look at it. I talked to a couple of his other wives, asked them to help. They said it would be no use. When Bluebeard Casale is set on marrying a woman it's as if she was hypnotized. She listens to nobody but him."

"I can see that," Shayne said. "What I don't see is where I come in. You had other detectives, but she still married him. I don't see what I can do."

"I want you to protect her."

"From what?" the big man asked. "I can't lock him out of his own wife's bedroom."

"It's not that."

"Do you mean keep him from getting her money? If you do, I think it's a lawyer you want instead of a detective. Once they married neither you nor I have any legal right to interfere in their affairs. I'm sure Casale knows that perfectly well. Maybe you can influence your mother by talking to her, but that's all I can suggest."

"You still don't understand," Irene Hicks protested. "It's not the money I'm worried about. Not even if he gets his hands on the whole fortune. That would be bad enough; I admit, but I can live without that money. I have some of my own from my father."

"What then?" the detective asked.

"It's my mother's life I'm worried about. I think that if we don't stop



him, he'll kill her. I want you to save my mother's life."

III

MIKE SHAYNE took the cigar out of his mouth and put it in the big ash tray on his desk top.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "What makes you think your mother's life is actually in danger? Have you any proof? Or are you just guessing? Who do you think is going to kill her?"

"Whoa," Lucy Hamilton said from across the office. "You're going too fast, Michael. Let Miss Hicks tell us in her own way."

"Will you help?" Irene Hicks asked.

"Of course he will, my dear," Lucy Hamilton said.

"If it's a case of threatened murder, I'll do what I can," the big redhead assured the girl. "That sort of thing is part of my job. I think you should go to the police first though."

"Wait," she said. "Hear me out. Then if you still want me to speak to the police, I'll do as you say. I want you on the job, though. Police or no police, I want to hire you. I'll feel safer with Mike Shayne on the job."

"That's kind of you," Shayne said. "Now start at the beginning and give me the facts."

"You must know what has happened to all of Casale's wives," Irene said. "Invariably their lives have been shattered by the experience of marriage to him. Of the eight one committed suicide just after the divorce and one at the time of his marriage to my mother. Two others have been declared legally insane and put in institutional care. Another should be, but her family trust is caring for her instead."

"Is Casale responsible for these tragedies?" Lucy Hamilton asked. "I mean can he be held legally responsible?"

"I don't know," Irene Hicks said. "That's neither here nor there. Certainly he's morally responsible for the physical or mental death of five out of eight wives. I don't want

Mother to be number six of nine."

"I still don't see what we can do about it," Mike Shayne said. "You are trying to hire me to work a miracle. There's nothing to go on. No evidence of intent to do anything on Mr. Casale's part."

"But there is." The beautiful young woman reached into her purse.

"Look at this."

It was a letter. The envelope was cheap stationery that could have been bought in any dime store. The message inside was composed of words and letters cut from a newspaper and pasted in place on the sheet. It read:

Miss Hicks. If your mother marries Dom Casale she must die. It is death to marry. If you want to save her life from him you must stop this marriage. I warn you as a friend. Dom will kill your mother. He will kill her as he has killed all his other wives one way or the other.

That was all. The envelope bore a New York City postmark and a Miami cancellation.

"I don't suppose you've shown this to the police?" Shayne asked.

"What good would it do? What possible chance is there of tracing a thing like that? I tried to show it to Mother. She just laughed at it. She said a great, wonderful man like Dom was always being harassed by cranks."

"Have you considered that might

be all there is to it?" Shayne asked. "The world really is full of nuts capable of writing a crazy thing like this."

"Of course I considered it," Irene said. "Then I got this second letter."

She took another envelope out of her purse and offered it to the big detective. It was similar to the first except that this one had been mailed in Miami. The postmark was only a week old. This one was short and to the point:

You should have stopped the wedding, Miss Hicks. Your mother will die. Look at the sleeping pills in her medicine cabinet if you think I am fooling. Look hard.

"What does that mean about sleeping pills?"

"I looked. Mother bought a new home on the Beach for herself and Dom to live in after they return from the wedding trip. It has been completely furnished and staffed with servants but she hasn't yet spent a night there. She will next week when they return from the honeymoon in Tahiti.

"I looked in the medicine cabinet of Mother's private bath in the new home. It was stocked with the usual items. I found a bottle of sleeping pills and took them to be analyzed.

"Mr. Shayne, those pills contain a deadly poison. They would have put my mother to sleep forever if she had swallowed just one pill.

Now, do you think I have cause for alarm?"

"Yes," Mike Shayne said, "I do. Whether it's her new husband or not I don't know, but I believe someone will try to kill your mother. I'll take your case."

Irene Hicks sat back in her chair, looking very much relieved. "Thank God. I feel much better already. Now here is what I want you to do. Mother and Dom fly in from Tahiti next Saturday morning. That night they give a housewarming party in the new home. People will be coming from Europe, the north, everywhere. It's to be an even bigger party than the wedding."

"That would be something," Lucy Hamilton said involuntarily.

"Dom does things big," Irene Hicks said. "He does this after every wedding. I mean, gives a big party. One thing more. He always invites all of his ex-wives to the party. I don't know why, but then who can understand what motivates a Dom Casale?"

"I want you at that party. You will go as my guest so I can introduce you to Mother and all the other people most closely concerned. It will be a chance for you to look things over. After that I want your suggestions as to what can be done to guard my mother. Will you come? You can bring Miss Hamilton and anyone else you like."

"I'll be there," Mike Shayne said.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Lucy Hamilton echoed him.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE stood at the edge of the private ballroom in the neo-Florentine-Spanish mansion that had been purchased by the ninth Mrs. Dominique Casale, and looked out over the crowd of dancing and drinking socialites and cafe society celebrities who thronged the big room almost to overflowing.

Lucy Hamilton, in a new and most becoming evening gown, was at the big man's side. Under the soft lights and in her new dress she was radiantly beautiful. Her eyes sparkled with interest and a keen appreciation of the festive scene.

The lean, gangling man in impeccably tailored evening clothes on Mike Shayne's other side was his good friend, *Miami News* ace writer Tim Rourke. Rourke was enjoying himself to the full. Parties might be part of the meat-and-potatoes of his job, but this was something special.

It was bigger, more lavish, above all, more expensive than anything the glittering South Florida Gold Coast had seen in many a year.

"That's the Afghan ambassador over there," Rourke was saying to his companions. "He's a second cousin to the king, and they say he has the finest harem east of Istanbul."

"What's he here for?" Shayne grinned back. "Just come down to compare notes with the host?"

"Michael," Lucy Hamilton said,

"I'm ashamed of you. Imagine saying a thing like that."

"I think it's probably correct," Rourke laughed. "Except maybe it's a touch too polite to call Dom a host. I don't really know what his status is at these parties. Prince consort maybe, or temporarily legalized lover to the Queen of Diamonds. Who knows? Anyway, he usually seems to get away with the diamonds in the end."

"He's got an armful of diamonds right now," Lucy Hamilton said, and pointed. "He doesn't look very happy about it though."

Indeed he didn't.

The tall, dashingly handsome Dom Casale was dancing near the center of the ballroom floor. His partner was a short, slender brunette in a gold lame gown and wearing a diamond necklace and tiara. A mass of black hair framed her face, but the face itself, in spite of artful makeup, was that of an elderly woman. The lines were there and the haunted look about the eyes.

"I guess he isn't happy," Rourke said. "That's the start of his career he's dancing with. Mrs. Casale number one. Anita. By God, I hadn't seen her in years. She must be seventy by now and seldom goes out in public at all."

"She's out this time for sure," Shayne said dryly.

"From her expression she's giving the dear boy hell and no mistake about it," Rourke said. "What-

ever she's saying it looks like he's having a tough time swallowing it.

There was no mistake about that. Above the big blue-black beard, Casale's face was frowning. He was much taller than the woman and had to hold her off at arm's length and look down at her as he talked. Even at a distance they could tell his eyes were angry and his face tense. Then the couple swept out of sight in the crowd.

"Why does he do it?" Shayne asked.

"Do what?"

"Ask all his ex-wives to his parties," Shayne said. "Any cab driver's got better sense than to mix old girl friends, let alone wives. He must be crazy."

"I don't know," Rourke said. "Call him crazy if you want, but don't forget at one time or another he's been married to pretty nearly every fortune in the country. That guy's gone to bed with the most expensive women this world's ever seen, and made every one of them pay him a fortune for the privilege. Some of the smartest boys in the game would envy him just one hit out of the lot. Just one."

"So?" the detective asked.

"So eccentric he may be, insane he's not." Rourke looked pleased with himself as he made the pronouncement.

Just at that moment a manservant in livery came quietly through the crowd to where they stood.

"Mr. Shayne?" he said. "Miss



Hicks says will you please come right away? It's important. I'll show you where she is.'

"Of course," Shayne said. To the others, "Come along."

The home Erma Hicks Casale had bought as a fitting setting for life with her new husband was nothing at all if not pretentious. Originally it had been one of the great estate mansions erected on Miami Beach. Its long rococco wings fronted the sea across the expanse of private beach. There was the ballroom, a billiard room, a private chapel and bedrooms and baths by the score.

In any country but the United States it would quite correctly have been labeled a palace. The Hicks money had completed modernized the great building, including an air-conditioning plant which would have sufficed for the needs of a good-sized hotel.

The servant led Shayne and his companions through long halls and up a private elevator ride to an up-

per floor. The room they finally reached was the sitting room for the master bedroom suite. He knocked softly on the door.

It opened almost at once and Irene Hicks beckoned to Shayne to enter. The young woman was dazzlingly beautiful that night, a triumph of the efforts of make-up specialists. She wore inherited necklace and bracelets of emeralds and pearls.

She was trying had to stay calm.

"Come in," she said. "You too. This is off the record for you though, Tim. Mind me now."

"What's the matter?" Shayne asked.

"It's Mother. She's in the bedroom. I'll bring her out here in a minute and let her talk to you. I swear I think she's gone crazy."

"Has someone threatened her again?"

"No, not that. It's something to do with Dom. He's been scared and it's got to Mother. I don't know what's been going on really. She's been saying wild things. Just about in hysterics. You'll see for yourself."

She broke off and went through the double doors that led to the bedroom. They could hear her speaking and another voice answering but could not make out the words.

"Michael, look," Lucy Hamilton said, pointing. "Did you ever see anything so beautiful?"

She was pointing to a carved statuette of Kali, the many-armed Hin-

du goddess of death, which stood on a small table near the window. It was about twelve inches tall and beautifully and intricately carved from a single block of dark cherry red amber. In the soft light the arms seemed to writhe with a life of their own.

"Beautiful," Lucy Hamilton said. "Beautiful and sinister."

The doors to the bedroom opened and Irene Hicks came out with her mother.

The new Mrs. Casale still showed traces of the same beauty that her daughter wore like a cloak. Age and a full life had blurred the edges, though, in spite of all that money could do to restore her looks and deny the ravages of time.

She wore a dress created in Paris and jewels to haunt the dreams of an avaricious maharajah. In one hand she held a large evening bag sewn all over with pearls with a simple design of a spray of fern outlined by emeralds. The clasp was of pure gold, intricately worked.

"Mother," Irene was saying, "I want you to tell Mr. Shayne exactly what you've just told me. Maybe he can help."

"It's Dom," Mrs. Casale said in a distraught tone. "He's afraid he's going to be killed."

"What makes you think so?" Mike Shayne asked. "Tell us. We can probably help you and him if we have the facts."

Erma Casale hardly seemed to have heard.

"Dom," she said. "Nobody can help Dom. Nobody should try. You don't know Dom. None of you. Not even you, Irene. Not even me. I didn't know him till tonight. That is, if I do not know him now."

"What do you mean, Mother?"

The others were looking with shocked eyes at the older woman. To Shayne's experienced eye she seemed to be already in the clutches of hysteria. He'd seen that look on woman's face many times before.

"Nobody knows Dom. You love him or hate him, but nobody knows him. What does he do to us all? Oh, Irene, what did he do to me?"

"Tell us," Shayne said.

"He made me love him," she almost sobbed, "but now—now he's going to have to die. All of us—all of us owe him that. Even me. Even me, baby, don't you see? He isn't really a man. He's a monster. He destroys everybody who loves him. One way or another that's what he does. I can't let him get away with it any more."

"What are you talking about, Mother? What changed your mind?

"This," the woman said. "This."

She fumbled in the beautiful, jewel-encrusted evening bag. What she brought out was a slender, gold-hilted stiletto in a soft crimson velvet sheath. It was about nine inches long, an antique of Italian manufacture and a pure work of art. The hilt was modeled as a naked girl standing with arms upraised and the swelling golden breasts. No one who

saw the little weapon could ever afterwards forget its beauty.

It was also a completely deadly and efficient little weapon. One thrust of the slender, triangular steel blade into heart or lung or the bunched spinal nerves, or brain, could kill the strongest man.

"What are you doing with that thing?" Irene asked incredulously.

"Oh," her mother said, more confused than ever. "This isn't what I wanted. It's the letter. The letter about Dom."

She appeared to be pawing through the contents of the bag again, still holding the knife in her left hand.

"It's not there. I'll get it and show you. I must hurry. The others are waiting."

"What others? What are you talking about?" This time it was Mike Shayne who spoke.

"Why, Dom's other wives, of course. I want them to see the letter too. They must see it." She turned and went to the bedroom doors. "Wait just a moment. I must have left it in here. I'll find it. I won't be a minute."

Erma Casale went through the doors and closed them behind her. She was still carrying both the purse and the gold-hilted stiletto.

The others in the sitting room looked at each other.

"You see," Irene Hicks said. "She's been like this all evening, only it's getting worse."

"Where did she get that dagger?"

Tim Rourke asked. "Does she really think she'd use it on old Dom?"

"Of course not," Irene said. "I never saw that thing before. I'll try to get it away from her though. Just in case."

Lucy Hamilton said: "Oh, the poor woman." No one paid any attention to her. It was as if they hadn't heard.

"Obviously somebody has got through to your mother," Mike Shayne said to Irene. "Very possibly it was the same person who wrote you the two other letters. Try to get hold of the one she got and give it to me when she comes back. Whatever it was, it's opened her eyes about Casale."

"What can we do, Mike?" Irene asked. It was the first time she had dropped the formal "Mr. Shayne."

"For now we'll just go along with her," the big detective said. "I want to see what happens at that meeting of wives. After that you and I can decide. The main thing is, we must not let her out of our sight for a while. Either you or I must be with your mother at all times tonight."

"What will the bridegroom say?" Tim Rourke said and laughed.

"The hell with the bridegroom," Mike Shayne said. "I think the honeymoon is over."

V

IT WAS A couple of minutes before Mrs. Erma Casale came out of the bedroom again. When she did

her face was set in hard lines. She was obviously making a great effort to control her emotions. All signs of tears had been wiped away and her makeup restored as best she could without the help of a personal maid.

She was still carrying the pearl and emerald bag; but whether the Italian dagger was still in it, Mike Shayne couldn't tell.

He hesitated to ask for fear of bringing on another outburst of hysteria.

Erma Casale looked right at him.

"I couldn't find the letter," she said. "I thought I had left it on my dressing table. You didn't take it, Irene?"

"I most certainly did not, Mother. I haven't even seen the thing. Do you want me to go back with you and help look for it?"

"Oh, no. Positively not." Her mother was most emphatic about that. "I must have put it somewhere. It doesn't matter. I can tell the others what it said. I suppose they know anyway. Come on, now. They'll be waiting."

"Perhaps you should take a quick look," Shayne said to Irene. "That letter might be important. I'd like to see what it says."

He was astounded at the vehemence of Mrs. Casale's reaction. She whirled on him like a tigress.

"No. Absolutely not. I forbid it. If you don't come with me now, all of you, I will call Chief Painter and have you arrested."

"Pete's just the boy who would love to do it too," Tim Rourke said. He laughed. Chief Painter's long-standing feud with Mike Shayne was famous all up and down the Beach.

Mike Shayne didn't argue the point. Some instinct told him that he should, but he was anxious to hear what Mrs. Casale had to say to Bluebeard's other wives. At the moment that seemed to be the most important thing.

They followed Mrs. Casale down a long hall and into the south wing of the huge residence. There was a second floor library there with big windows facing out over the beach to the sea. Miles out, in the Gulf Stream, they could see the sparkling lights of a big luxury cruise ship passing up the coast.

Four women were waiting for them there, seated about a big library table over by the windows. All of them had drinks in their hands. There were bottles and a silver ice bucket on the table.

None of the four women rose to greet their hostess and her companions.

Irene Hicks made the introductions for her mother, who still seemed very much distraught. Mike Shayne studied the women with interest.

Mrs. Anita Casale, the first of Casale's brides, he had already seen on the dance floor. She was by far the oldest of the lot. She tried not to show either her age or the tension

which gripped her. Shayne noticed that she was drinking Scotch. She drank like a man, taking hefty swallows from the glass without a chaser.

Numbers two and three in the series were not present. Both were presently confined in institutions for the care of mental disorders.

Numbers four and six were dead by their own hands, one of them as recently as the date of Erma Hicks' wedding.

Number five was the daughter of an old New Orleans cotton and sugar family. Her father, Louis Hambro, had set up a shipyard during World War Two and made himself a fortune running into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Jean Hambro Casale was a slight, small-boned brunette with the dark, brooding eyes which revealed her Creole heritage. She seemed the most frail, almost sickly, of them all, quiet and delicate and reserved. She acknowledged the introduction with only a nod and what might have been the ghost of a smile.

Of all the women Dominique Casale had wooed and won this was the one who best deserved the title of a woman of refinement and culture.

Number seven was Helen Miles Casale, daughter of a Midwest family which had long manufactured a popular make of automobile and finally sold out to one of the big four car makers. The cash and stock realized by that sale had supported the

family in more than luxury ever since. At least all of the surviving members were still extremely wealthy except for Helen. A brief married life with Dom Casale had cost her all the cash upon which she could readily lay hands. All that was left her was a small trust fund.

Helen was a medium brunette with large, soft brown eyes that contrasted strangely with a thin-lipped, determined mouth. She had good looks, but certainly was the least beautiful of the lot.

Across her left cheek was the thin white line of a scar acquired during the marriage to Casale. Servants' gossip had it he had hurled a broken pitcher at her during a drunken quarrel. Helen herself never mentioned the scar.

Number eight, the wife whose divorce from Casale was less than a year old, was something else again. She was younger than the rest, still in her late thirties, big-hipped, big-busted, broad-shouldered, long-legged blonde. Her accent was the Texas drawl and her fortune came from oil wells. Casale had cost her millions, but the wells were still flowing an apparently endless flood of black gold. She was probably the wealthiest of the eight women who had preceded Erma Hicks to Casale's bridal bed.

This did not make her the happiest. The wide blue eyes had a feverish glitter and her whole personality showed nerves drawn to an ultimate limit of tension. Vera had al-

ways been noted for her wildness, her drinking and roistering on a scale that had shocked even the Texas *nouveau riche* in a world of hard men and easy money. Her fits of temper were proverbial since girlhood. Since the divorce her outbursts of rage had become almost manic in their intensity.

This was the woman Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke had heard was only kept out of a mental institution herself by the power of her family's money and political influence.

Anita Jordan, Helen Miles, Jean Hambro, Vera Kelly and finally Erma Hicks. A wife and four ex-wives, all bound by ties of love and hate to the great, pantherish Latin whom the detective had seen dancing on the floor below in that great gilded ballroom.

Shayne thought to himself, "What a helluva poker hand that bunch would make."

Lucy Hamilton looked from the seated women to the big detective. He could see that she was thinking something very similar.

Once Irene Hicks had completed the brief introductions she stepped back to let her mother speak.

"You may wonder why I asked you all to come up here while the party's still going on downstairs," Erma Casale said. She was still fighting for control, but at the moment doing a good job of keeping her voice low and even.

"Oh, think nothing of it, honey," Vera said. "We had a little reunion

like this when I was queen bee too. Real cozy, I think."

"Shut up, dearie, and let her talk," Anita Jordan said. "I think she's begun to catch on to Dom already."

"I asked you to come," Erma continued, ignoring them both, "because I want to find out which one of you wrote me a certain letter. I must know that."

"What letter?" Helen Miles asked calmly.

"A letter I received this morning," Erma said. "A letter which warned me that my husband was so desperate for money that he would kill me to inherit my fortune."

"Oh, don't be silly, love," Vera Kelly broke in. "Dom doesn't murder people. Why should he? He'll get his share from you the way he did the rest of us. He'll make you so miserable you'll pay him whatever he wants. You may even kill yourself. A couple of us did, you know. Maybe that's what the letter meant."

"The letter said Dom would murder me. Which one of you wrote it?"

"I didn't," Jean Hambro said in her soft southern voice.

"Nor I," said Helen Miles.

"Don't look at me," Anita Jordan added. "I'm not sure I'd warn any one of you even if I thought Dom was planning to kill you. I don't, though. Vera's right. He doesn't actually kill anybody with his own hands. Why risk being



charged with murder when he can destroy you so much more easily in his own charming way?"

"I can give you the reason," Erma Casale said in a flat, nearly toneless voice. "On our wedding day I signed a marriage contract and a will. Both of them provide that Dom — my husband — inherits every cent of my money if I die while still his wife. Is that reason enough?"

"Oh, Mother," Irene Hicks said. "Oh, Mother!"

"My God," Vera Miles said in her brash voice. "You sure are the damned fool, love. For a pot of gold that size old Dom-boy would stomp his own mother to death. Didn't you have no sense at all?"

"That was indelicately put," Helen Miles said, "but it was very much to the point all the same. Surely your attorneys must have warned you?"

"They tried," Erma admitted. "I just wouldn't listen. I insisted on doing what Dom wanted. I was

afraid to lose him, I was so in love with him. I guess that you all must understand that."

Mike Shayne could see by their faces that they did understand indeed.

"Even if we do understand," the soft-voiced Jean Hambro said, "I don't see why one of us would write you such a letter. Even setting aside a natural feeling of rivalry amongst us all, we would hardly be in a position to know of any threat to your life. We don't keep in close touch with Dom, you know."

That made a lot of sense to Mike Shayne.

"Was the letter signed?" the redhead asked.

"No, it wasn't," Erma Casale said. "There was no signature—but on the other hand there was. The writer referred to certain things about Dom Casale that only a wife, or at the very least a lover, could possibly have known about. I mean little intimate details of his habits, even his lovemaking, that are so distinctively personal that no outsider would be able to guess or bluff about them."

"She means old Dom between the sheets," said Vera Kelly with a loud laugh. "You can bet nobody could invent those particular details. You know what I mean, girls."

"You don't have to be so coarse about it, Vear," Helen Miles said. "We can take Erma's word for it, I guess, that whoever wrote this letter was familiar with Dom's little

ways. That is, if we grant that there ever was such a letter. I for one am not quite ready to do that until I see it."

"There's a letter," Erma Casale said flatly. "It came today and it warned me I would be murdered within a week. I have no clue as to how. I must know who wrote the letter."

"All I know is I didn't," said the loud-voiced Vera Kelly, and poured herself another Scotch. "How about the rest of you girls?"

Each of the three shook her head in an emphatic negative.

"This is preposterous," Erma Casale said. "One of you must have."

Behind her the doors to the library opened and two men came in. One was the servant who had brought Shayne to Mrs. Casale a little while before. The other was Police Chief Peter Painter.

At the sight of the dapper little chief Mike Shayne had a sudden premonition.

"Mrs. Casale," Painter was saying, "I think you'd better come with me for a moment. Your husband, Mr. Casale—" He hesitated there.

She turned to him with a white and broken look. "Mr. Casale is dead." It was half question, half statement.

Peter Painter nodded.

VI

FOR A MOMENT there was stunned silence in the library of the Casale mansion.

Mike Shayne was the first to speak.

"What happened, Petey?" he asked. "Has our host of the evening had an accident?"

Painter seemed to notice the big redhead for the first time. His face took on the irritated expression Mike Shayne usually produced for him.

"I'd hardiy say an accident," he said shortiy. Then: "What the devil are you doing here anyway, Shayne?"

"Mr. Shayne is in my employ. Mine and my mother's," Irene Hicks said. She stood up and put a protective arm about her mother's shoulders. "He is welcome to go wherever Mother and I go."

Painter looked as if he wanted to say: "That might mean all the way to jail." But he suppressed the words.

Instead he asked her: "In what capacity is Shayne employed? He's a dangerous man to have around."

"You don't have to answer that, Miss Hicks," Shayne said. "My services are confidential. Where is Mr. Casale, Chief? And what has actuallly happened?"

"We'll go see," Chief Painter said. "At least I want the present Mrs. Casale right now. Her daughter can come with her if she wants. The rest of you stay right where you are."

"Mr. Shayne goes with us," Irene Hicks said firmly.

"No," Painter said. "Shayne stays here. I'm in charge of this investigation, and what I say goes. I'm sick

and tired of having people mess up cases I'm handling."

"In that case my mother and I stay here too."

"I don't understand you, Miss Hicks."

"See if you can understand this, then," Irene Hicks said. "Unless Mr. Shayne goes with us, Mother and I are not moving a step out of this room until our attorneys have been called and had time to get here. That's our legal right, and you know it. Now what do you say to that?"

"You wait for the lawyers, Petey," Tim Rourke said, "and by that time the party will be over. There'll be fifteen hundred guests, half of them soused to the gills and all of them VIPs wanting to go home. How you going to stop them? And if they once scatter away from here, your killer can go with them."

"I've thought of that," Painter said.

"I sure hope you have," Shayne said. "You mess up a case this big, and how long do you think you'll stay chief in this town?"

Painter was furious, but there was very little he could do about it.

"Okay," he said finally. "Mike Shayne can come along with Mrs. Casale. Only Mike. Not you too, Rourke. You'll get your story when the rest of the press people covering this party get theirs, and not one second sooner."

"The rest of you stay in the building. I have men posted to see that

nobody leaves. To prevent trouble I'm asking you not to talk about Casale's death right now."

He turned to Mrs. Casale, Irene Hicks and Shayne. "Okay. Come along now."

The party went directly back over the route they had traversed such a short time before to the master bedroom suite. This time was a man in servant's livery posted at the door. Shayne recognized him as one of Painter's security detectives regularly assigned to parties like this one.

There were more detectives in the sitting room. Most of these were plainclothes men from the chief's own squad. They were busy searching the room, dusting for fingerprints and in general trying to look busy while Painter was there.

The chief led Mrs. Erma Casale on into the bedroom. Irene Hicks and Mike Shayne followed.

The room was like something out of a Hollywood extravaganza of the 1930s. It wasn't quite as big as a football field. Not quite.

The bed itself was a carved four-poster so big it might almost have held Bluebeard and all nine wives in a row.

Dominique Casale was stretched out across the bed at an angle with his feet up toward the elaborate lace-covered bolsters at the headboard.

He lay on his back, completely dressed in the evening clothes he had been wearing to the dance. His

eyes and mouth were open, but strangely enough his face was not contorted. The expression was rather peaceful.

There was blood on the front of his fifty-dollar linen dress shirt and on the lapels of his white dinner jacket.

Dom Casale had been stabbed neatly and efficiently in the small, vulnerable triangle just under the rib cage. His heart had been pierced instantly.

The hilt of the murder weapon stuck up and was clearly outlined. It was modeled in the form of a naked woman of gold with tiny arms upraised above her golden head.

Mike Shayne saw Erma Casale flinch at the sight. Peter Painter and his men saw it too.

Irene Hicks maintained an iron composure that Mike Shayne could not help but admire. The only sign she gave was a slight widening of her large, beautiful eyes.

"Well," Shayne said, "at least you've got yourself a corpus delicti this time. Petey. I don't have to go and find you one this time."

It was intended to make Peter Painter angry, and from the way the little chief started and reddened, Mike Shayne knew he'd succeeded. Painter didn't do his best thinking when he was mad, and that was what Shayne was counting on.

"That is your husband?" Painter said to Erma. It was an inane ques-

tion, but the best the chief could muster at the moment.

Erma Casale nodded. She was trying not to look at the body, but her eyes kept returning to the face of the corpse as if drawn by invisible wires.

"When did you see him last? Alive, I mean," Painter asked.

She said: "About an hour ago. Perhaps an hour and a half. We danced together down in the ballroom. Then I felt unwell. I excused myself and came up here to rest. He was still dancing when I left."

She almost broke down then. "Oh, my God. If only I hadn't left him, if I had been with him, then perhaps—perhaps now he'd still be alive."

Then she turned and buried her face in her hands. Her body shook with deep, wracking sobs that spoke of a woman in torment. Irene's eyes sought Mike Shayne's in question.

The big redhead rose to the occasion.

"Look, Petey," he said to the chief. "Let's cut out all this for a while. This woman is still on her honeymoon and you've dragged her in here to look at the dead body of her husband. She's in shock. Let her go to her daughter's room for a while. You can talk to her any time you want."

Chief Painter seemed to be thinking that over.

"Okay," he said finally. "Miss Hicks, you see what you can do for your mother. Don't any of you leave



the building now, though. If this murder is going to be solved at all, it will have to be in a hurry. I'll be talking to you again in a few minutes."

"Petey was right," Mike Shayne told Irene Hicks a few minutes later in the girl's room. "This is one time in his life he's going to have to work fast. It's midnight now. By three o'clock the guests at this shindig will start leaving. By five they'll all be gone and the killer along with the rest. By then Painter's got to show results. These people are too important for him to hold them all. He's got to have a case in a matter of hours. I'm glad I'm not in his shoes."

"In a way you are," Irene Hicks said. "As soon as he asks a few questions, Chief Painter will have a

case. I mean a case against my mother. That knife was hers. That scene denouncing him to the other wives. She was the last one in the wives. She was the last one in the bedroom before the body was found."

Erma Casale turned to face them.

"I didn't kill Dom," she said. "As God is my witness I didn't kill him. I was angry enough, I know, but I didn't. He wasn't in the bedroom when I was."

"That is your dagger, Mother?"

"Yes. Dom bought it for me in Rome, for a letter opener."

"It'll be traced to her," Shayne said.

"I was afraid it would," Irene admitted.

"She had the weapon," Shayne said. "She gave herself a motive in front of the four ex-wives. She was the last one known to be on the scene of the killing. Petey Painter is going to have to put her under arrest. If I was in his place, I would do it too."

Back in the upstairs library Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton waited with the dead man's four ex-wives.

Vera Kelly finished her highball and poured more Scotch into the glass. "Shouldn't we be holding a wake or something, girls?" she asked the others. She laughed that deep chesty laugh of hers, but this time there was no mirth in it. "Old Bones caught up with Dom at last. Shouldn't we all be weeping? Anybody here for weeps?"

"You aren't funny, Vera," Anita Jordan said in acid tones. "Dom's murdered and dead. For all his faults, let him lie. Let him lie."

"Who said anything about murderer?" Tim Rourke asked. "Chief Painter didn't use the word."

"He came close enough," Helen Miles said acidly. "How else would Dom die anyway? He was always in magnificent good health."

"What's the difference?" Vera Kelly said. The drink was beginning to slur her words. "He's dead, damn him. He's dead and who's going to weep? Not us for sure. Not even his mother, if he ever had one."

"Who killed him?" Anita asked. "God knows I've thought of it often enough, but it wasn't me."

"If he was killed within the last few minutes you all are alibis for each other," Rourke said, to see how they'd react.

"Not very good ones, I'm afraid," Jean Hambro said softly. "We all got to this room at just about the same time and that wasn't more than a minute or two before you people showed up with dear Erma."

"Who cares?" Vera Kelly said. "We can all lie for each other, can't we? Sisters under the sheets. That's what we are. All for one and one for all, and to hell with good old Dom. That's what I say. That's what we all better say. Anybody wants an alibi I swear she was with me. How's that, girls?"

"Does that apply to Erma, too?" Tim Rourke asked.

"To hell with Erma," Vera Kelly said. "Last in, first out. Let Erma take her own chances."

Back in the master bedroom where the body of Dominique Casale still lay, Chief Peter Painter was questioning Mrs. Casale's personal maid.

"How did you happen to find the body?"

"I came in the room to see if there was any straightening up needed," the woman said. "I didn't notice right at first. This room is so big and all. But as soon as I looked at the bed—first I thought like he'd laid himself down to rest. Until I saw the blood, that is. Then that there knife in him."

"Did you ever see the knife before?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Of course. Mrs. Casale brought it back with her from the wedding trip. I noticed when I unpacked her things. I thought it was real pretty then." The woman looked again at where a coroner's man was working over the body. She shivered. "How would I know then, sir?"

"Of course you wouldn't know," Chief Painter said. "I just want to be sure of where you were all evening and how you happened to find the body."

"It was like this, sir," the woman said, pulling herself together. "Earlier I helped Mrs. Casale dress for the party. Afterward, she sent me over to the other wing on this floor to help with the women guests. Some of them needed help to touch

up their hair or lipstick or like that. A bunch of us maids from the house were on duty like we always are when there's a big party."

"Then maybe an hour ago Mrs. Casale sent for me here. She'd been crying about something. All upset she was. While I was here Miss Irene came in. They talked, but low, so I couldn't hear. Then Miss Irene rang for one of the men and sent him after that Mr. Mike Shayne and his friends. I left before they got here."

"A little later I saw Mrs. Casale and all them over in the south wing heading for the library. I thought I'd slip back here and straighten up a bit while they was gone."

"That's when I found him."

"Could Mr. Casale have come into the bedroom after you left and before Mrs. Casale and her friends went to the library?" Painter asked.

"That's right, sir. He could have. He might have come through the door that opens on the corridor and not have to go through the sitting room at all."

"I see," the chief said. "He could have come in after Shayne and the rest were in the sitting room, but they wouldn't have seen him or known he was here. If Mrs. Casale was with them all the time, she wouldn't have known it either."

"That's right, sir."

"Wilson," Painter called to one of his men, "go find Miss Hicks and tell her I've got to talk to her mother again. Right now." To the maid:

"You go show Wilson where the girl's room is."

VII

"SEE HERE," Mike Shayne was saying to Irene Hicks at just that moment, "Chief Painter's going to be sending for your mother again by time now. He'll have to question her. You take her along when you go. Tell her she doesn't have to answer any questions until a lawyer gets here. Use this phone in your room here to call one."

"I don't have to. I think Mother's attorney is dancing downstairs right now."

Back in the upstairs library Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton waited.

"Then quickly send for him," Shayne said. "And tell your mother to tell him the truth no matter what it is."

"Do you think she killed Dom?" Irene asked him.

"I don't know," Shayne said. "That's being honest with you. I really don't know. I do know Petey Painter will have enough of a case to arrest her."

"If Mother says she didn't kill Dom, then she didn't. I believe her. I want you to prove she didn't. Can you do it?"

"Maybe," Mike Shayne said. "Just maybe I can prove who actually killed Casale. I say maybe because I'm like Petey. I'm short on time. I'll try. You've got to realize I may

find it was your mother who did it. If I do I won't cover up."

"Can't we at least forget about her going back into the bedroom with that awful knife?" Irene pleaded. "Just until you find out for sure who did it, I mean?"

"No," Shayne said. "We can't. Remember Tim Rourke saw it too. Lucy Hamilton wouldn't lie about it and neither would I. Even if we did, somebody could get your mother to talk in the state she's in. After that nobody'd believe any of us about anything. If you have to answer questions at all, do it honestly."

"Suppose I gave Mother some sleeping pills to calm her down. Then they couldn't trip her on her story."

Shayne spun until he could look the woman right in the face. "Don't you give your mother anything like that. Don't even give her an aspirin. Mind what I tell you. Her life could depend on it."

"What on earth do you mean?" Irene protested.

"Look at it this way," the big detective said earnestly. "You say your mother's innocent. If that's so there's a killer loose at this party. He or she must know there's a strong case against your mother. Suppose she died? The real killer would have a cover for sure. Painter and the rest would assume your mother committed suicide because she was guilty and knew she'd be caught."

"Oh!"

"That's right," Shayne said. "Somebody already put poisoned sleeping pills in your mother's medicine cabinet. You showed them to me yourself. Anybody smart enough to do that once could do it again. Mrs. Casale would be better off not risking any medicine of any sort, or any food or drink you don't prepare with your own hands for the next few hours."

Irene Hicks looked crushed. "I never thought of that."

"I don't blame you," Mike Shayne said. "After all, it's the sort of thing I'm supposed to think of, not you. Just do as I say, though. Stay with your mother and get her lawyer with her as fast as you can. I'm going out now to follow up on a couple of other ideas I have. First of all I want to talk to that batch of grieving widows in the library."

The widows in the library weren't exactly grieving. In fact, they were not all still in the library.

"The hell with it," Vera Kelly had announced to the rest a few minutes before. "This is supposed to be a party, isn't it? For the first time in years I've really got something to celebrate. What do you know? The devil's got old Dom at last."

"Oh, Vera," Helen Miles said, "do you have to say that?"

"I don't have to," Vera said. "I just say it because it's true. Believe me, girls, I'm going downstairs where the bar is and try to catch me a nice man to celebrate with. That



cop can find me if he really wants to."

"She'll talk her head off," Tim Rourke said to the others.

Anita Jordan got to her feet.

"I'll go along and keep an eye on her," she told Rourke and the rest. "Maybe I can talk some sense in her on the way down. If not, I'll hit her with a champagne bottle."

She gave them a lopsided, cynical grin and took Vera Kelly's arm. The two women left the room.

"Maybe Anita should let her talk," Helen Miles said. "Everybody knows how crazy Vera is. They wouldn't take her seriously at first, and when they did it wouldn't be so much of a shock coming from her."

"Oh, Helen, you know better than that," Jean Hambro said in her soft, cultivated voice. "By now every servant in this place will have the news by backstairs grapevine. Some of

them will have let it out one way or another. I'll bet by now the only reason half of Erma's guests haven't taken off for home is that they're just plain dying of curiosity to see what happens next."

"What do you think will happen next?" Tim Rourke asked the southern beauty.

"Why, they'll arrest Erma, of course," she said.

"Who is this Mike Shayne anyway?" Helen Miles asked.

"Yes," Jean echoed. "Who is he? He wouldn't by any chance be the famous Miami detective I've read about?"

"He most certainly would," Lucy Hamilton said.

"What's he doing here?" Helen asked.

"He's on a case for Irene Hicks," Tim Rourke said. "Now that this has happened, though, I'm sure he'll be around until the thing is wound up. Of course, we don't know for sure that Mr. Casale was murdered. The chief didn't exactly say that. It could have been an accident or a heart attack or maybe just suicide. We'll know when Mike gets back, so let's not rush things and assume somebody killed the man."

"Dom being the sort he was, I just assumed that," Jean Hambro said, "and I guess after the way Erma was talking, and with Mike Shayne here and all, I just jumped to the conclusion she'd knocked him off."

"Jumping to conclusions can be

dangerous," Rourke said. "By the way, how do you know so much about Shayne?"

"I read the *News*," she said and smiled at him. "I have a condominium apartment here on the Beach that I use for several months every year. I've been following Mike Shayne's career for years now."

"Then you know that if there really was a murder, Mike won't rest until it's solved and the real killer taken." That was Tim Rourke standing up for his friend.

"Why, yes," Jean Hambro said. "I suppose I really do know that."

To the watching Lucy Hamilton it seemed that the dark southern beauty was making an extra effort to seem casual as she spoke. Or was it imagination?

At that moment, Mike Shayne was talking to Beach Police Chief Painter back in the master bedroom suite of the mansion.

"What have you really got, Petey?" the redhead was asking.

"When I finish checking I'll have plenty," Painter said importantly. "The maid says Mrs. Casale was hysterical and talking wildly about the dead man earlier today. I'll bet I can trace that dagger back to her, too. She won't talk until her lawyer counsels her, I guess, but even then she'll break down."

"You seem mighty sure she did it," Shayne said.

Painter was almost condescending. "Just for this one time you're not going to mess up my case,

Shayne. Remember the sort that stiff there was. Any one of his wives would hate him enough to kill. My bet is it had to be one of them, and the present wife is the most likely. Even you got to admit that?"

"I don't mess up cases," Shayne said. "I solve them. You ought to know that. One way I do it is not pick one suspect out of five before all the evidence is in."

"This is cut and dried," Painter said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the coroner's assistant who had been working over the body came across the room to the two men.

"There's something funny here, chief," the man said. "This guy was stabbed to death all right, but there's something else. It'll take an autopsy to know for sure, but I'll bet my hat right now he was drugged or poisoned first. He might even have been dead when he was knifed."

VIII

TWENTY MINUTES later Mike Shayne was back in the library with his two friends and the four ex-wives of the dead man.

He had had one of the servants find Anita Jordan and Vera Kelly and ask them to come back upstairs. Anita came willingly enough. She still wore that faint cynical smile of hers as if the whole tragic affair was

no more than a faintly off-color and slightly boring joke.

Vera was protesting loudly. She was drunk by now. Tim Rourke had had to go himself to get her back to the library. By the time they got there she had an amorous arm around the gangling new writer's shoulders.

"Get it over with, big man," she told Shayne loudly. "Lover boy here and I want to be alone."

Lucy Hamilton laughed aloud at the expression on Tim Rourke's face.

Just at that moment the library door opened and Irene Hicks came in.

"I slipped away for a few minutes," she explained to Shayne. "Mother and her lawyer are talking. After that they'll be with Mr. Painter while he asks questions. I can be back upstairs long before that finishes. She'll be safe enough until then for sure. I gave orders no one was to give her any medication."

"Okay," Shayne said. "In that case everybody's here that should be. Make yourselves comfortable. There's a few things every one of you ought to be told."

They all seated themselves again at the big table. Vera Kelly made Tim Rourke sit beside her where she could lean her head against his shoulder. She also made sure there was a bottle of whiskey within easy reach.

"Okay now," Mike Shayne said when they were all seated. "I'm go-

ing to give it to all of you straight. We're all adults here tonight.

"Dominique Casale is dead. As you've probably guessed or heard by now, he didn't die a natural death. He was murdered.

"Again, for reasons I'm sure I don't have to explain, the police consider all of his ex-wives as prime suspects. Oh, don't shake your heads. It's the natural conclusion, and they're going to follow it up until they've checked out every one of you. They'll do it thoroughly, too, and it'll be a lot easier than you might think. With a house full of people and servants as nosy as they are, I'll bet nobody moved far tonight without being seen."

"Nosy bastards," Vera Kelly said. "Who cares anyway?"

"The murderer cares," Shayne said. "The killer always cares. This one set it up to look as if Mrs. Erma Casale did the killing. It was a smooth job, too. There's enough evidence right now so the police suspect her. I think in the hysterical state she's in that she almost suspects herself. When I left her she was talking wildly about wishing she was dead."

"Isn't there a chance she really might have done it?" Helen Miles asked.

"No," Irene Hicks said. "No."

"There's a chance," Shayne said, as if Irene hadn't spoken. "Of course I don't believe she did. When the police look into it further, I think they'll agree with me. There's

evidence pointing to her innocence.

"One of the biggest items indicating her innocence is the letter she told you about earlier tonight. Somebody had to send that letter. Mrs. Casale mislaid it, but it'll be found. When it is, it can be traced. There are ways to bring out prints with infrad-red light even when they've been wiped. Anything tangible can be traced with modern methods. Believe me, that letter will be found."

"If Erma's talking about killing herself," Anita Jordan said, "it looks to me as if she's guilty. Why else would she say a thing like that?"

"She hasn't killed herself yet," Shayne said. "I admit that if she did it would look like a confession. The police might see it as a confession but she hasn't. The letter will be found. In the meanwhile all of you are suspects too. No one of you will be clear until the killer is known. I want you to think about that. Go back to your rooms and think of anything, no matter how small, that you may have seen or heard, that can point to the real killer. Remember, you'll be clearing yourself if you help us. Don't try to leave the building. I'll be along to see each of you later."

When the four ex-wives had left the room Irene Hicks turned to face Mike Shayne.

"I suppose now you'll tell us what all that was really about," she said. "I'm no detective, but I know

there was a lot of double talk mixed into that frank discussion."

"Yeah," Tim Rourke said, "like that infra-red fingerprint reading method. What was all that for?"

"Michael wants to see which one of those women goes after the letter," Lucy Hamilton said. "Then maybe she'll lead him to it. Isn't that so, Michael?"

"Not quite," Shayne said. "I want to see who goes for the letter all right, but I know the killer can't get it. Petey Painter already sent it to the crime lab downtown. They won't find any prints, though. The paper is really clean."

"How did you find it?" Irene said.

"I didn't," Shayne said. "The police found it. In the breast pocket of the dead man's dinner jacket. He must have found it himself earlier in the evening and taken it. I'd guess he either hoped Erma hadn't seen it yet or planned to destroy it. Maybe he wanted to trace it himself and find out who was spoiling his game. Anyway, it's already out of the killer's reach."

"You figure you can still use it for bait," Tim Rourke said.

"I can't think of a better bait," Shayne admitted, "except for Erma Casale herself."

"You're deliberately putting my mother in danger," Irene Hicks accused him.

"Not that much danger," Shayne said. "When she leaves the chief she's going to the personal maid's



room adjoining the master suite to rest. She'll hardly want to lie down on her own bed tonight. There'll be a policeman posted at the door to protect her."

"Protect her or guard her?" Irene Hicks asked bitterly.

"I'd say protect," Shayne said. "You see, the corner's man found old Dom had been drugged before he was knifed. We think the killer slipped him the drug downstairs in his food or drink. From a quick analysis they say-it was a drug that wouldn't kill him, but would make him feel pretty sick. When he left the party to lie down or get medicine or whatever, I think the killer followed him. The plan must have been to shoot or stab him, or maybe just strangle him when he was alone and helpless from the drug."

"As it turned out he went straight

to the master suite. The killer followed. Inside the suite there was Dom helpless on the bed, and there was the dagger your mother had left when she took it out of her purse. A determined woman could have entered the bedroom while we were still in the sitting room, knifed Dom on the bed and then slipped out by the door direct from the bedroom to the hall. She could just have beaten us to the library. They said they all arrived together just a minute ahead of us."

"And how," Tim Rourke said, do we find out which clever woman did all this? "Suppose she doesn't rise to the bait you've put out. It wasn't very subtle, maestro."

"A killer always has to take the bait," Shayne said. "I'm going to ask the servants some questions now while this one works up his or more likely her nerve to try for that letter. Miss Hicks, you go stay with your mother until I come. If anybody tries to enter the room, have the cop at the door stop them.

"Tim — you and Lucy call anybody you can rouse in town at this hour. I want to know who Dom Casale was seen around with just before he got to Erma Hicks. An ex-girl friend could kill as well as a wife."

IX

THE FIRST PLACE Mike Shayne went after leaving the library was down to the kitchen. Once there he

made himself a big smoked turkey sandwich and wolfed it down while talking to the servants.

He got little information he didn't already know except the location of the guest rooms assigned to Helen Miles, Vera Kelly and Anita Jordan. Jean Hambro wasn't staying at the big house.

"She has her own place somewhere here on the Beach," the housekeeper told him.

The others were all in the guest rooms on the second and third floors.

It took the big man only about fifteen minutes to eat. Then he went upstairs looking for Irene Hicks.

The room usually occupied by Mrs. Erma Casale's personal maid adjoined the woman's dressing room of the master suite so that the maid had quick access to the main rooms whenever her mistress rang. It did not open directly into the dressing room, however, probably for reasons of privacy, but had its own bath and was entered by a door to the hall.

A plainclothes detective was on guard outside the door. He greeted Shayne with a wave of his hand.

"Anybody tried to get in here?" the big man asked.

"You'll be the first to go in or out," the Beach officer said. "I guess the ladies are resting."

Mike Shayne went in and closed the door. He was a little surprised that Irene hadn't locked it from the outside, but supposed she had felt

safe enough with the policeman posted in the hall, and wanted him to be able to get in easily if she called out.

The light in the room was out, but a certain amount of night light filtered in through the closed Venetian blinds. The big redhead could make out two forms on the bed, one under the covers and one lying fully clothed on top of the spread.

When he got closer, he was able to see that the second form was Irene Hicks. He walked over to the bed, stepping lightly so as not to wake Mrs. Casale and touched Irene on the shoulder.

A little to his surprise she didn't move. He shook her again. Still no response, though this time his efforts made her head move about on the pillow.

Mike Shayne was alarmed now. He switched on the small lamp on the bedside table. What he saw shocked every nerve to an instant and total alert.

Irene Hicks lay on top of the covers. Her eyes were wide open, but blank and without focus. Her breath was irregular and harsh. Shayne realized at once that she'd been drugged, probably with an injection after being knocked unconscious.

He moved the unconscious form and pulled back the bed covers. Mrs. Casale wasn't under them. Instead a bolster and a couple of pillows had been arranged to simulate the outline of a sleeping form.

On the white linen cover of the topmost pillow, where the head would have rested if someone had been in the bed, words had been printed in big block letters. A lipstick had been used instead of a pencil. The message read:

GUILTY
OH GOD GUILTY
CAN'T BEAR IT LONGER

Shayne took one look and yelled for the cop outside the door. The man ran in.

"What's going on here?"

"Look for yourself," Shayne said to him. "While you were having day dreams in the hall somebody got in here and snatched the woman. The daughter's drugged."

"Nobody came through that door," the detective said. "Nobody at all. I never left my post."

"Then it was fairies," Shayne said. "Get on the house phone or get out of here and get Petey Painter. Miss Irene needs a doctor, too. Step on it."

"Why me? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to follow an invisible killer through a non-existent door," Shayne said. "You tell Petey to seal off this crazy house so nobody goes in or out. If the guests want to go home, tell 'em it's an air raid or something. Seal the place tight. Tell him I'm going after the killer."

The city man went out into the hall on the run.

Shayne took a quick look into the bathroom and closet attached to the

maid's room. He even looked under the bed. There was no trace of either a live or dead body.

Since there was only one other possible source of access to the room, Shayne went to the window next. As he'd expected it was closed —the whole place was air conditioned.

This window wasn't locked, though. Someone could have gone out and then closed it, but not fasten the latch from outside.

Shayne opened the window. Outside was an ornamental iron balcony that ran the whole length of the building's second floor. It was narrow, but both wide and strong enough for a man of his size to walk along. If the killer had been carrying an unconscious Erma Casale, he or she could have taken this route with only minimal difficulty. Shayne decided this must be what happened.

He squeezed through the window without trouble. The north end of the building's facade was only a short way to his left, and he decided this must be the way the killer and victim had gone. Anyone going to the right over the main entrance would have been in much greater danger of being noticed from the ground below, where assorted servants were lounging by the parked cars.

Shayne passed four windows, all of them locked and with the blinds closed behind them before he came to what he was looking for. This

was a narrow door near the corner of the building. The redhead had figured there had to be some regular means of access to the balcony. After all, it would have to be cleaned and painted and the outside of the windows washed.

The door was locked, but Mike Shayne's ring of pass keys and lock-pick tools made short work of opening it.

It opened, not into a hall but on the landing of a servants' stairway. Another door led from the landing to the second floor hall. Shayne ignored that one. Anyone stepping out would have been seen by the detective on duty a short way down the hall.

He followed a hunch and went up the stairs. One flight above a door from the landing opened into the third floor hallway. Shayne didn't think the killer had gone out that way either. The third floor was occupied by servants' and guest rooms. On the night of a big party there would be people moving about here constantly.

The killer wouldn't risk being noticed. At least Mike Shayne was going to act on that assumption.

From this landing on the stairway, never very wide at best, narrowed even more. There was a door at the top, and it was locked. Shayne put his burglar instruments to work again. Within thirty seconds he had the bolt shot back and the door began to open under his hand.

He looked into what seemed to

be an endless tunnel of darkness filled with looming and undefinable shapes. He couldn't see far in the dim light seeping in from the hallway, but he recognized this as a gigantic garret filled with stored furniture, piled and heaped boxes and all sorts of unrecognizable accumulations of previous owners of the mansion.

Somewhere off in the darkness he saw a flash and heard the report of a gun.

Someone had fired at his dimly seen silhouette in the doorway.

X

MIKE SHAYNE's instincts reacted instantly before his conscious mind had time to grasp what had happened.

The big man bent at the knees and made a long dive into the darkness and the shelter of the piled-up furniture even as his hand groped for his own big forty-five automatic in its belt holster back of his right hip.

The door to the stairway swung shut behind him and shut off the dim light against which his standing figure had been outlined.

There was no second shot from the ambushed killer up ahead.

Shayne waited. In the darkness and with his own gun in his hand, the redhead private detective wasn't afraid. He felt himself a match for any man or any woman he'd seen that night.

He felt deadlocked. In a place of this sort he might just as well have been surrounded by the thick and trackless jungle of the tropics. He had no idea of the size of the garret, let alone its arrangement. If it was arranged like those in most of the huge old houses, it would be primarily just a great open storage space running the whole length of the building, as long as an ordinary city block. There would be several stairways or trap doors leading up and into the space. There might well be small rooms partitioned off for storage of valuables or the quartering of servants.

Without a detailed plan or a prior inspection by daylight there was no way he could do more than guess at the actual layout.

Apparently this garret had been used for accumulation of broken or out-of-fashion furnishings, trunks of old clothes, bales and boxes of forgotten equipment and supplies for forty or fifty years.

In every direction he'd have to go over or around or through all sorts of mysterious barricades. They would impede his every step and at the same time provide a thousand points of cover from which the killer might launch a deadly ambush.

Luckily it wasn't absolutely dark. There was at least one skylight away off toward the center of the long building. Also there were a few small windows under the eaves. While these were primarily for ventilation and circulation of air against

the summer heat, they did let in a certain amount of reflected night light from outside.

After a few minutes Shayne found that his eyes were growing accustomed to the dim light. He couldn't make out any real details of his surroundings, but he wasn't quite blind, either. His situation was almost that of a diver who has gone down to almost the ultimate limit of penetration of the sun's rays.

Mike Shayne had been in night fights before and was accustomed to using hearing and even the sense of smell as an aid in orienting himself.

He knew, for instance, that the shot had come from ahead and a bit to the right of his present position. He guessed the gunner had been roughly sixty feet from the door when the shot was fired.

To fire at all the killer must have had a relatively clear field of aim. That meant an open space or lane running through the heaped-up detritus in a direction which Shayne already knew. If he could find and follow that open doorway, he'd have to be closing in on the killer.

In the dark he wasn't even concerned about the gun. His own bulk would no longer be outlined against light from the air shaft, and not one amateur gunner in ten thousand can score a hit in the dark. When he does, it was to be by pure luck.

It was a confident Mike Shayne then who started his deadly stalk in

the dark, hot air of the garret. Nevertheless, it almost cost him his life.

He located the narrow alleyway through the attic more by feel than any other sense. It ran from his position in the direction he wanted to go.

It had to be straight to afford a field of fire, and he learned, by spreading out both arms, that it was no more than five feet wide.

Shayne could have fired his own big gun straight ahead up the lane if he wanted. He didn't want that. The killer would certainly have shifted his position somewhat. If Shayne's first shot missed, the big man would be revealed by the light from the muzzle blast of his own gun.

He doubted that the killer could miss with a second shot at the close range. He didn't want to find out.

Also he wanted this killer alive for a confession, and to tell him the present location of Erma Hicks Casale. If she was tied up and hidden it could take hours to find her in here even with the aid of police flashlights.

Besides, Shayne was reasonably sure his enemy was a woman. He disliked the idea of killing a woman — particularly when he had a good chance to take her alive.

He moved slowly and quietly down the narrow, almost pitch-black lane.

He hadn't gone six steps before he knew.

He didn't see her or hear her move. He smelled her. Just a whiff of warm body. A fragrant ghost of perfume. Enough to warn him, to stiffen every muscle ready for instant action. Too late.

Even as his big left hand swung to grab her where she crouched, he was caught by wrist and elbow. There was a calm surety and confidence about that touch which warned him again, which screamed a message to his every instinct.

Then the pain struck as she applied pressure to the chosen karate centers. His arm was paralyzed. His lungs tried to scream and failed.

With a last conscious effort before pain blanked his intelligence in searing waves he hurled himself forward into the pitch dark.

Only a man trained by years of desperate fights for life and kept in superb physical condition could move fast enough and hard enough at a time like that. She wasn't expecting it and so he tore himself, partly by the thrust of his big body, away from her hands.

He lit on his face and right shoulder, left the rough boards of the garret floor scrape his bare cheek. Another wave of pain convulsed him and set him rolling.

Then, for a moment, everything resolved in a whirling, tornado of agonized pain. Even semi-conscious he kept crawling, driven by reflex and instinct alone. Each second he expected to come headfirst into the side of the passage and be stopped.



He would be helpless as a child then, immobilized by pain, and in the hands of a trained karate expert.

It was a miracle that saved his life, one of those one-in-a-million chances that a man's guardian angel sometimes provides.

His desperate plunge had taken him forward and to the side, but not into the solid bulk of a trunk or bale. Instead his head and shoulders had gone under the hanging leaf of a big antique cherry-wood drop-leaf table which sided the passage at that point. Crawling, he had thrust himself under that table and another which flanked it. He was out of the lane along which he had been moving and in a small open space between other piles of furnishings.

Back in the open space he'd left the killer must be groping for him in the dark. Shayne fought to hold still, to keep even the sound of hoarse breathing from betraying his location.

Downstairs an orchestra still played and a thousand guests danced. The muffled sounds of revelry helped make it hard for the killer to hear him, even as it covered the sounds of her soft-footed movements.

Mike Shayne knew that he was in a very tough spot.

In the dark, hot jungle of that attic he was alone with a calculating killer. She had killed once already that night — twice, if Erma Hicks Casale was no longer alive. She'd kill him if he let her.

She would—and he had a sickening conviction that she could. His gun was gone, dropped from his hand with the first wave of pain. In the pitch dark and totally unfamiliar surroundings his weight and bulk were no advantage. If anything they handicapped him by making it harder to move silently.

Shayne knew judo himself. He was better at it than most, good enough to know by the way the woman had taken him and broken his strength in the dark that she was a past master at the art.

If she found him again, on her terms, she could kill him. A black belt could handle two as good as he, and Shayne knew it.

She was intelligent too. Instead

of waiting for him to find her in the dark she had moved toward him down the narrow lane, thereby giving herself the advantage of surprise. The woman was smaller and slighter than the big redhead. She had crouched down and flattened herself against the wall so that his groping hand went over her head and he passed her without knowing. When she struck it was from behind and with total surprise.

If his hidden personal radar had failed to warn him at the last possible micro-second, Mike Shayne would have been absolutely helpless in her hands.

He shuddered where he lay.

After a while he got to his feet and, very slowly and with infinite care, began to move through the piled up objects stored in the attic.

He wasn't sure how to get out from where he was. At any step he might walk into another ambush or bump against the killer. She had to be searching for him too.

More than that, he couldn't just try to escape. If Mrs. Casale was still alive, and he believed that she was, he was her only hope. If he left the garret, she'd be killed long before the police could come up and find her. He'd been hired to protect her, and it went against every deep instinct Mike Shayne had held to all his life to abandon a client.

He had to find the killer and take her. He wasn't yet sure how it could be done. Not sure if it could

be done but willing to risk his life again to accomplish his mission.

"There's just one thing going for me," Shayne told himself silently. "She's got to find me just as badly as I have to find her. She can't just go off and finish off Erma Casale and leave me to blunder around in here until I get out. I'm an X-factor to this killer and she has to put me out of the picture for good."

"She probably figures I know who she is by now. Even if I didn't the police could backtrack all four of those wives and find out which one knows judo. She had to study somewhere under a master, and that can be traced."

"No, she can't just leave me for unfinished business. She has to come get me. I don't have to go look for her. All I have to do is make a noise and she'll come into me like an iron filing to a magnet."

Shayne stood perfectly still there in the dark and grinned to himself.

"That's the worst part of murder. It isn't ever over and done with. There's always unfinished business. Sooner or later there's something the murderer can't finish. It never fails. Now, she has to find me, and I have to let her."

He felt a carton of books under his hand and plucked one out and threw it as far as he could in the dark. It bounced off something that rattled and thudded to the floor. Wherever she was, the killer had to hear that sound.

Seconds later he picked up an-

other book and hurled it again, this time in the opposite direction from the first. Then he waited.

This was an intelligent woman. She got the message he had tried to send her, and responded as he'd known she had to do.

"I'm coming, Mr. Shayne. I'm coming for you."

He heard her low, cultivated voice. It came from up ahead of the way he faced. To the left? Or the right? Behind him? In the dark, echoing cavern of the garret it was impossible for him to tell for sure.

"We have to find each other, don't we?" the voice came again.

Now he was sure it was behind him. Or was he? How could he tell?

"Why didn't you use the gun again just now?" he asked in an effort to keep her talking.

The answer was preceded by a low, musical laugh.

"Only one cartridge," she said. "It wasn't my gun. I stole it from Helen's luggage and I could only find one shell. Besides, I don't need it. Just like I didn't need the knife to finish Dom. I was going to strangle him but there was that beautiful knife all ready to frame Erma with."

Shayne couldn't be sure if the voice was getting closer. "Why did you kill Dom?"

"That's a silly question, Mike Shayne," she said. "You do know who I am, don't you?"

He was sure now that she was

creeping up on him although he hadn't heard even a whisper of sound except for the cultivated, amused voice. He recognized that, of course.

"You're Jean Hambro."

"Of course I am. Now you know why I killed him. That pig. He mocked me. He married for money and stole from me. That great, hulking animal dragged the pride of a great family down to the filth of his own hog wallow. Of course he had to die for that. Of course."

She was getting closer. Mike Shayne had a plan, and he prepared to put it into action.

He sat down on the floor with his back against the heavy cartons of books. The one on top projected a little over those below so it was as if he was under a small shelf. The woman could only get at him from in front. He drew up his knees to his chest and sat there waiting and listening.

She was too close now to go on talking so he knew the attack would come shortly. She couldn't see him any more than he could her, but she must hear him breathing or smell the sweat beading his big frame and soaking shirt and jacket.

He waited, straining every nerve to detect her. Jean Hambro was the smallest of the wives of Bluebeard but by far the most deadly.

He sensed rather than knew when she was almost on top of him. He lifted both big feet together and kicked out into the dark. He meant

the kick to stop and smash her like a battering ram.

Jean Hambro must have heard him move or caught the change in rhythm of his breathing. Maybe she just "felt" the menace with the incredibly refined fighting senses of the wearer of the judo black belt. She did the impossible, a swift back somersault from a standing position that took her out of his reach.

Mike Shayne was on his feet with a frenzied lunge. He caught the top carton of books with both hands, twisted and vaulted over the pile away from the woman. Her reaching hands almost got him — almost.

Behind him in the dark he heard her laugh.

"You're good, Mike Shayne," she said, "Very good. I'm going to find you and kill you, but I'm sorry about that. You're a better man than Dom. I wish I'd met you first."

"I can understand why you must try," Shayne said. "I can understand Dom Casale." He could, too. Given the woman's almost insane pride of family coupled with her sense of rejection by the fortune-hunting Bluebeard, he could see how the killing hatred grew.

"What I don't understand is Emma Casale. She wasn't even the first after you. What harm did she do you?"

"No harm," Jean Hambro said. "I need someone to take the blame. When I finish with you I'll teach her pain. She'll sign a confession and hang herself here in the dark. When

they find you both they'll blame her for Dom's death. She's an unstable woman, Mike Shayne. Not like you. I could have driven her insane with a few more letters."

"The letters told me who you were, of course," Shayne said, still playing for time. "Of all of them you were the only one who had a Miami home. The postmarks. The fact you could have been in this house when the Bergamo family owned it and entertained here. You must have been a guest."

She laughed again. "That's right. I sent them to Erma and Irene. I knew they'd upset Erma so she'd give herself a motive to kill Dom. Then I was going to kill him in their bedroom. A nice touch, that of the bedroom I thought. I drugged his drink downstairs so he'd go back there to be sick. So he'd be weak and helpless and I could taunt him before he died. It was clever, Mr. Mike Shayne. It worked."

Shayne was groping among the piles of heaped up furnishings to find something he could use as a weapon. He felt cloth under his fingers, the rough pile of folded carpet, the upholstery of a big couch —nothing that would make even a club.

"I'm coming, Mike Shayne," Jean Hambro said. Her voice was closer. "The police will be along soon. You and Erma have to be dead when they get here."

Suddenly Mike Shayne laughed too. He knew all at once what he

was going to do. The weapon that was not a weapon was ready for him to use.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked. "Is it funny that you'll be killed by a woman not a third your size or weight?"

With the end of the question she came at him, over the top of the stacked furniture at his left. She came swiftly and silently and ready to leap down and paralyze him with those deadly pressure points.

Mike Shayne's right hand caught the corner of the folded rug his fingers had touched. He grasped it with both hands, flipped it open like the cast net he'd long ago learned to use on mullet in the Florida waters.

With a great heave of his powerful shoulders and arms the big man tossed the carpet over the oncoming woman.

It was the one weapon for which karate skills had no effective answer. She floundered and thrashed under its weight in the darkness. Dust choked her.

Then Shayne was on her. His big fists struck at the spot where her head had to be. Her body was still as Jean Hambro lapsed into unconsciousness.

Mike Shayne tied his killer and rolled her in the rug which had been her doom. He tossed her over his shoulder and started for the stairway at the corner of the garret.

At the door he met Chief Peter Painter and a dozen Beach detectives coming up.



The cost of blind revenge? Too often it is very high indeed. As high as Murder—as high as a hangman's noose . . .

The Blueblood People

by MAX VAN DERVEER

IT WAS AN elegant high rise, one of the most expensive in the city, and the apartment was vast, neat and beautifully appointed.

Martin Cross thought the girl elegant too, very handsome and collect-

ed. She used excellent taste in her dress, a plain white pant suit with just the right touch of flare here and there. She looked about twenty-eight. Her name, she had told him over the phone when she had sum-

moned him at 11:10 o'clock this summer Wednesday night, was Geraldine "Gerri" Wagner.

Cross had answered the summons of this stranger because he had been curious about how she knew of him and because she had said there was a dead man at her feet.

The dead man's name was Andrew Farragut. He probably had been thirty years old. He had been stabbed several times in the back, the murder weapon ripping through a finely tailored suit coat. He had bled profusely. He lay front down in his own blood.

With the exception of the left-hand coat pocket, all of the other pockets in his clothing had been yanked inside out.

Cross stood, feeling relief in his leg muscles. Squatting was for younger men. A faint ache remained in his right ankle. The ache was with him whenever he strained or it rained. The ache was a reminder of his former years with the CIA, a souvenir of the chain flogging administered by Castro henchmen.

The smashed ankle bones had mended, but the ache had been born. The ache was why he had quietly retired from the CIA before the director could put him behind a desk in some obscure corner of earth.

Two opened suitcases were on the carpeting about fifteen feet beyond Farragut's head. The locks of the suitcases probably had been smashed open with the base of the

wrought-iron lamp that lay off to the left. The contents of both suitcases had been strewn and rumpled. If Farragut had been carrying money of anything of value in the suitcases, it too probably had been stolen.

Cross faced Gerri Wagner.

"Thank you for coming," she said calmly. "I called you because I know of you through a friend of a friend. If you don't mind names being tossed about, my friend is Tony Street, the attorney, and Mr. Street's friend is Bennett Mitchell who is in Washington with the Central Intelligence Agency."

"Mr. Mitchell and I are friends," Cross conceded.

"I have not talked to Tony Street this evening," she went on. "Your name and your work, Mr. Cross, have been occasional conversation at social affairs regularly attended by myself, my father and mother, Mr. Street and others.

"In case you are unaware, you are quietly gaining a reputation of being an excellent and expensive confidential investigator. I can afford you. I have been reared in wealth. My father is Carlton Kennedy, the newspaper owner here and in several other cities, and my mother is Alice Terry, who was a film star in the late thirties and early forties."

Pedigree established, thought Cross.

"Andrew Farragut," Gerri Wagner continued with a glance at the

body, "just this evening returned to the United States from Uruguay. I have known him since childhood. We grew up on bordering estates. Andrew's parents died in a cruise ship fire off the Florida coast a number of years ago. Andrew and his younger sister, Kathy, were reared next door by their grandfather, H. T. Farragut, the industrialist. Their grandfather died three years ago. Andrew was with him. Kathy was not.

"Kathy had gone off somewhere to become a hippie. She didn't bother to show up for the funeral. That nonappearance disturbed Andrew more than most people knew. He became restless, out of tune with those around him, bored. Andrew was easily bored. Finally he announced that he was going to Uruguay.

"Andrew was a brilliant young man with an incongruous interest in agriculture. I don't even pretend to understand how or where his passion for agronomy developed. All I am sure of is he was a graduate student in the field, he had to get away following the death of his grandfather, he was good in his work, and for the past twenty-nine months he had been spreading his intelligence for the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Uruguay. But, true to his nature, he eventually became bored and decided to return here. What he intended to do in the future I do not know, except that he professed an interest in

marrying me. But frankly Mr. Cross, I have been undecided about that proposal. Andrew could become—could have become bored with me too. Do you understand?"

Cross understood. But he did not understand why she had summoned him when she should have called the police.

"Just what is it you want from me?" he asked.

She hesitated, then seemed to shrug off the indecision.

"Perhaps I should have called the police right away," she said. "But when I walked in here, saw Andrew—"

"We do have an excellent police department in this city, competent men with access to laboratories and files and—"

"I am aware, Mr. Cross."

"Did you kill Andrew?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who might have killed him?"

"I do not."

"You said that when you arrived you walked in. I assume you mean the front door was not locked."

"The door was open, Mr. Cross. Not wide open, just a crack. I thought that odd. I pushed it open all the way, and then I saw Andrew."

"Why did you come here tonight? Did Farragut call you to tell you he had returned to the city?"

"I knew he was coming. He had written a letter. His plane arrived at seven-ten this evening. He tele-

phoned me from the air terminal, asked me to come here at eleven o'clock."

"What time did he call?"

"It was seven-fifteen exactly. I remember looking at my watch and thinking that the flight had arrived on time. That's so unusual these days."

"And over the telephone he asked you to be here at eleven o'clock?"

"Yes."

"You were punctual?"

"I always am punctual."

"All right, you arrived, you came up and—"

"Not quite. I arrived at exactly eleven o'clock. I drove over in my car. It's out front, about four cars down the street. But as I walked toward the entrance to this building I saw Kathy, Andrew's sister, run out of the building. She ran in the opposite direction. We did not pass, and I am sure she was unaware of my presence."

"Is Kathy still living a hippie life?"

"From her dress tonight, I'd say she is. It was the first time I've seen her in months, more than a year."

MARTIN CROSS explored the immaculate apartment. It looked very unused. There was no dust, and there were fresh vacuum marks on the carpeting. A closet in one bedroom was filled with male wear, bureau drawers equally full. The closet and bureau drawers in the second bedroom were empty. Baths off both



bedrooms were spotless and the kitchen glistened.

Returning to the living room, he frowned down on three crushed cigarette butts in an ashtray near a barrel chair. The cigarettes were a popular filter tipped brand, the butts long. It was as if the smoker had lit the cigarettes but decided against each after a few puffs.

Gerri Wagner asked, "Do you have a cigarette, Mr. Cross?"

Had she anticipated again?

"Sorry," he said, knowing a sudden hunger. "I recently quit smoking. You did not leave the butts?"

She shook her head. He went to the suitcases, searched expertly without disturbing.

"If you are looking for cigarettes there," said Gerri, "don't bother. Andrew was a non-smoker."

"When you last saw him."

He returned to the body, examined it again. Andrew Farragut had needed a shave. Cross asked, "Do you have any idea how long a direct drive from the airport to here would take?"

"Approximately an hour depending on traffic."

"So Farragut could have arrived here as early as eight-thirty this evening," Cross said, looking inside the coat pocket that had not been turned out. He gingerly removed a folded paper from the pocket.

"What's that?" asked Gerri Wagner.

"A motel receipt, dated today. The motel is here in the city." Cross refolded and returned the receipt to the pocket. "Why would Farragut stop at a motel?"

"I—don't know."

"Interesting, isn't it, Miss. Look, is it Wagner or Kennedy?"

"Mrs. Wagner technically," she said. "I once was married."

Cross nodded. "I see. Well, it appears that the killer was waiting for Farragut in the apartment or that Farragut had a visitor immediately upon his arrival. He obviously did not get as far as either bedroom and he had not refreshed. He could have surprised a burglar, of course, or a robber or mugger could have spotted him during the flight or at the terminal, followed, attacked, and killed for money, credit cards, anything. On the other hand, why not ransack the apartment? Tell me more about Farragut's sister. Would

she kill and rob her own brother? Were they that estranged?"

"Their grandfather left a large estate," Gerri Wagner said slowly. "There were no other heirs, just Andrew and Kathy, and Andrew was left in control. Old Mr. Farragut cut off Kathy when she sought a new life. Andrew went along with his grandfather's will, but he put Kathy's share in trust for her. His stipulation was that she return to a normal life. After three years, she would have access to her share of the inheritance. The stipulation was designed to prevent her from appearing, collecting, and then returning to her 'other life,' as Andrew called it."

"So brother and sister never totally lost contact."

"No."

"He could have written her, too, told her he was returning to the country."

"I'm sure he did."

"Do you know where to find her?"

"No."

"The police will want to talk to her."

"I—can't believe Kathy would kill Andrew."

"She could have come up here, found him dead, panicked. But if she did, that would mean she too had to find the door open, unless she has a key."

"No, she wouldn't have a key to this apartment. It is owned by my former husband, Leland."

She paused. Cross waited. She

looked him straight in the eyes for a few seconds, then continued, "Leland, Andrew and I grew up together. We went to high school, church, the university together. We explored, discovered, shared many things, and there have been many things that could have split us, but none did. There was that terrible accident a few years ago, for instance. We were home from the university for Christmas, Mr. and Mrs. Wagner gave a party for us. During the party Mrs. Wagner had to go somewhere, Andrew volunteered to drive her, they had an accident, Mrs. Wagner was killed. The day after the funeral Mr. Wagner suffered a fatal heart attack. That could have split Leland and Andrew. It didn't.

"Or there was the marriage between Leland and myself. We could have lost Andrew, we did not. And, of course, there was the divorce, but Leland and I have remained friends. During our marriage we found simply that we were not as compatible as we once thought. It was an amicable divorce."

"And can I assume Leland is not in the city?" Cross asked.

"He's in Los Angeles. He has been for approximately four months. Leland has become an ecologist, one of those persons caught up in this pollution thing. Naturally he and his friends have gone into it big. They are not satisfied with fighting industrial, river or city pollution, they're fighting the pollution of the Pacific Ocean. They have the mon-

ey, of course, but—well, frankly, Mr. Cross, I think they are like this man Nader, spinning wheels in the sand."

"So with Andrew's decision to return to the United States, Leland offered the temporary use of his apartment," Cross said.

Gerri Wagner nodded. "Leland expects to remain in California until the end of the year. And Andrew did not have a home base. His grandfather's estate was sold some time ago."

"Well, Mrs. Wagner. I think it is time to call the police. There is a homicide sergeant named McAndrews. I've worked with him."

"I've been hoping—"

She hesitated, flexed long fingers. "Well, I suppose I wanted to avoid involvement, but I am involved, am I not?"

"Perhaps you should telephone your attorney."

"I want Andrew's killer found."

"McAndrews is competent."

"And I still want you," she decided. "In addition to the police."

SERGEANT MCANDREWS and his people were quietly efficient and thorough. Following the preliminary examination of the apartment and the deceased, McAndrews took Gerri Wagner and Cross aside and listened intently as she repeated everything she had told Cross.

Cross could not find a discrepancy in the repetition, but once during McAndrews' interrogation

Cross suggested that the detective give Gerri Wagner a cigarette. She was a smoker and out of cigarettes. McAndrews, with a significant glance at Cross, offered her a silver metal case. She removed a cigarette, leaving her fingerprints on the case. Then McAndrews dismissed her on her own recognizance and Cross accompanied her down to the sidewalk.

He walked with her to a polished sports car, saw an open eatery up the street and suggested a cup of coffee. In the tiny cafe she purchased a package of cigarettes from a machine. They were a non-filter brand.

It was thirty minutes past midnight when Cross left Gerri Wagner. The search for and the drive to the large motel consumed forty-five minutes. He wondered if he might already find McAndrews at the motel, but he did not see anything that looked like an official police sedan. He telephoned the air terminal from a pay booth in the lobby.

The seven-ten flight he wanted had arrived on time. He went to the desk and asked a chic clerk if Andrew Farragut was registered. The girl looked mildly surprised and then told him that Mr. Farragut had checked out.

"Hmm," said Cross. "We had an appointment."

The girl attempted to be helpful. "Mr. Farragut checked in early this evening, but left a couple of hours later. You might try Mr. Wicker in

7-A, however. Mr. Wicker also asked for Mr. Farragut this evening. Perhaps you know Mr. Wicker?"

"No." Cross feigned indecision, then said, "I wanted to see Mr. Farragut. Well, thank you, miss."

"I wouldn't have suggested Mr. Wicker," the girl said, "except that I saw him leave the bar about five minutes ago."

Cross left the lobby, moved out of the girl's sight. A man named Wicker in 7-A. He was not prepared to believe. There had to be a catch in this somewhere. Things never were so simple as this. Except, of course, sometimes — just sometimes — things happened this way. Simple.

Wicker was a second surprise. Cross felt startled, and the square, red-haired man inside the motel doorway took a step back. Both men stared and then suddenly, simultaneously, they grinned.

Cross moved inside and the red-haired man closed the door before Cross exploded, "Randolph!"

"Cross!"

They shook hands warmly and Cross said, "Small world."

"You knew that before you left us, you old devil," grinned Randolph. "What's with you here? You didn't just spot me accidentally tonight. I saw the expression on your face when I opened the door."

"A man named Andrew Farragut."

Randolph sobered immediately, said nothing.

"He's been murdered."

Cross explained rapidly and then asked, "Was he an agent, Randolph? Was the agronomy bit a cover?"

Randolph shook his head. "Not an agent, Cross, but he has been in our employ. You know, bright young college boy heading down to Uruguay for the Ag Department. We hired him to keep his eyes and ears open, that's all, nothing specific. He gave us periodic reports. But he tired finally, packed his tent and came home. I set up a meeting with him here for a couple hours' talk. We're interested in the guerrilla movement down there; but Farragut didn't have anything we don't already know."

"Nothing that would get him a shadow and a killer? Maybe he had something and didn't know it."

"There's always the possibility," admitted Randolph thoughtfully. "I taped him tonight and you can bet we'll tune our ears when we listen, but I really don't think he had anything, Cross."

"Could he have become involved in drug running?"

Randolph frowned. "We kept a pretty close eye on him. I don't think anyone else got to him."

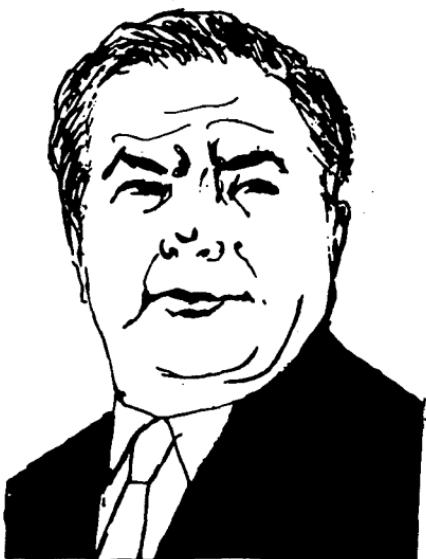
"But you are not positive."

Randolph shrugged. "He might have brought something in. I'm not saying it was impossible."

"When are you leaving town?"

"Early."

"I'll keep in touch through Washington."



"We'll be interested," said Randolph. "Things haven't changed that much since you were with us. We still don't get involved in anything domestic, but I'll appreciate hearing."

"One question. What time did Farragut leave here tonight?"

"He left this room at nine-thirty-five. Help?"

"I don't know," Cross said truthfully.

Cross surprised himself and slept long and hard. It was noon of a bright Thursday when he awoke. Ninety minutes later he had showered, shaved and mused through a refrigerator brunch. Then McAndrews arrived unannounced.

"I want to know about a guy named Wicker," the detective said bluntly. "He's vamoosed from the

motel, checked out early this morning."

Cross already had made the decision. It was one of the things he had mulled over during the brunch: to tell or not to tell the truth about the man who had called himself Wicker. Cross had decided it would not be unethical or a serious breach of security if he explained the CIA agent.

"Damn," said McAndrews, "this Farragut is turning out to be a real complicated guy. He left Wicker-Randolph—at nine-thirty-five, huh?"

"Give him fifteen minutes to check out," nodded Cross, "and forty-five minutes to take a cab to the apartment. That gets him there around ten-thirty-five. Mrs. Wagner arrives at eleven on the nose, she says, but sees the kid sister running out the building. So let's shoot another five minutes. That gave Farragut forty minutes, less, in which to get killed. How are you tagging it, McAndrews? Was Farragut followed or was someone waiting inside?"

"Three cigarette butts in the ashtry of an otherwise spic and span place say someone was waiting inside. On the other hand, someone could have followed, killed, then fired up three cigarettes while going over Farragut and the suitcases."

"What about fingerprints?"

"The place is cleaned twice a week by maid service, even in the owner's absence. It was wiped down good yesterday, and that helped. We've got the maid's prints here and

there, of course, you gave me Mrs. Wagner's, and then there were Kathy Farragut's. We found them on the lamp base. That's it."

"How do you know you have the Farragut girl's prints?" Cross asked quickly.

"Because we've got her," McAndrews said with a grunt. "We took her out of a commune down in Lamp Heights early this morning. Most of the so-called restless generation is in the Heights, have been there or will get there. Anyway, we got her. And she claims she found her brother dead. She says she got a letter from him about a week ago. That's how she knew when he was coming in and where he was going to land. She says she wanted to see him because of a large inheritance which she claims belongs to her.

"Anyway, she says she went up to the apartment around nine last night, found a locked door, didn't get an answer to a ring, natch, cut for a while, then returned. This was just before eleven o'clock. Okay, she says she hit the apartment, found the door ajar this time, went inside, found her brother dead on the floor. She says she bolted, but she's lying. We found her brother's wallet on her and we have her prints on the lamp base. It doesn't take much of a brain to figure she beat open the suitcases. Boy, she's a beaut."

"But if she killed him, why are you here?" Cross wanted to know.

"Because I don't have a weapon.

And she could have found him dead, just like she said. She could have rifled and then bolted."

"Does she smoke?"

"Pot. Straights are for cubes, she says."

Cross pondered for a few seconds and then sighed. "Okay, McAndrews, can we eliminate burglar, robber, mugger?"

"I'm willing."

"And I'll stand on Randolph's thinking. No one trailed Farragut home from Uruguay. How about the drug angle?"

"I like it. The contact man could have been waiting. I like it especially if Farragut was a rookie at running the stuff. He brings it in and he gets killed instead of paid for his trouble."

"Then there's Gerri Wagner," Cross said. "Perhaps she was at the apartment much earlier than eleven o'clock. All we have is her word. She could have been coming out, spotted the sister, ducked aside. Or perhaps she was inside all the time Kathy Farragut was looting her brother. Perhaps she saw Kathy's presence and running as a lucky break, somebody to feed the police."

"Any suggestions on motive?" McAndrews asked.

"None, but motive might surface if we dig. There was a possible remarriage in the offing."

"Which reminds me," said McAndrews, "I found her ex-husband in L. A. early this morning. He's flying in. Got his own plane. He

should be here late this afternoon. Maybe he can open some new doors on Farragut's past. Well, I got to shove, have another session with the Farragut girl. I was afraid that we were only going to be able to keep her twenty-four hours, but with the wallet we've got her booked."

WITH THE DETECTIVE'S departure, Martin Cross attempted to reach Gerri Wagner by phone. Listening to the rings in his ear, he attempted to visualize such a handsome and seemingly collected blueblood in a rage, a rage so deep she would stab repeatedly. He had difficulty drumming up the image. Finally he put the phone together and stood frowning. Had Gerri Wagner left the city, perhaps the country? Was a murderer on the run?

She arrived at Cross' apartment shortly before five o'clock. A tall, slender, deeply tanned young man who was immaculately groomed stood to one side and just slightly behind her. His eyebrows were raised inquisitively. She introduced Leland Wagner.

Wagner appeared to be an easy-going charmer, but he was a nervous smoker, too. He butted one cigarette in the room's only ashtray while his former wife apologized reflexively for their sudden presence and he lit a fresh cigarette.

"I thought Leland should be here," Gerri said. "I remained awake most of last night attempting to find him in Los Angeles, but

without luck. And no wonder. He was in San Diego."

"I flew back into L. A. early today," Wagner put in. "A police detective named McAndrews caught me."

"Just before I did," said Gerri Wagner.

"I got here as fast as I could," said Wagner. "Gerri met me at the airstrip. Now I am beginning to wonder why I am here."

"Well, because Andrew has been murdered!" his former wife exploded.

"Yes," nodded Wagner, "but I'm having difficulty believing it happened, doll."

"If you had seen him, it would not be difficult."

Cross wanted a cigarette badly. He thought Wagner amazing. The man had been on the go for many hours and yet he looked as if he had just stepped out of a shower and dressed for a casual evening. Gerri Wagner surprised him. What had happened to her calm, her cool? In Wagner's presence she was an excited woman. Perhaps, on her part, the divorce had been an error.

Cross asked, "Shall I call downtown and see if McAndrews is in?"

"We'd rather he came here," said Gerri Wagner, flashing a glance at her former husband. "There could be newspaper and television people downtown. If it won't be too much of an inconvenience to you, we'd like to have Mr. McAndrews come here."

"It would be an inconvenience," Cross said shortly.

Lying bothered him. But there was the psychological advantage for McAndrews in the interrogation room at police headquarters. Citizens tended to give straight, swift answers at headquarters. There were none of the comforts of home. Rather, there was a bleakness that worked against citizens and for policemen. Citizens wanted to get away from the drab as quickly as possible. Policemen were cooperative. All they wanted was straight answers and the citizens could fly.

Cross watched the David Brinkley evening news show on television. He felt restless and out of things. Perhaps he should have gone to headquarters with the Wagners. He could have sat aside, listened.

He wanted a cigarette. He glanced across the room at the lone ashtray, shook himself, settled back in the chair. A man really was hooked when he had to sneak a drag or two off the butt of someone else's cigarette. Get the butts out of sight. Out of sight, out of mind.

He took the ashtray into the kitchen, emptied it in the garbage container. The butts were the same brand as those that had been crushed out in Wagner's apartment. So? The brand was popular and Wagner had been in California last night.

Cross telephoned police headquarters. The Wagners had departed and McAndrews was out of pocket. No one knew where McAndrews

had gone, perhaps home, his trick for the day was finished.

Cross drove to the high rise, his thoughts clicking. He found Gerri Wagner's sports car parked in front of the buliding. Leland Wagner answered his ring. Wagner looked surprised and then he opened the door wide. He drew on a cigarette.

"Come in, Mr. Cross. Gerri isn't here. I dropped her off at her place to freshen. But now I wish I had stayed with her."

He glanced down at the large blood stain on the carpeting, wrinkled his nose in distaste, and smoked. "I didn't know I'd find this. Anyway, Gerri and I are going out to dinner later. Will you join us?"

"Were you in San Diego last night—or here?" Cross asked.

Wagner's face fell. His eyes suddenly became slitted.

"You knew when Farragut was arriving," Cross pressed. "You'd had correspondence with him. You flew in yesterday, slipped up here, was waiting for him. You killed him, left, failing to close the door tightly, then flew back to the coast. That's why your former wife was unable to reach you early this morning. You were flying back to L. A. Of course, if someone in L. A. or San Diego can account for your presence last night—"

Cross let the words hang on purpose, but Wagner said nothing, merely looked startled.

Cross continued, "You're a heavy smoker, Wagner. You left cigarette

butts here last night, left more in my apartment this afternoon. The brand is the same."

Hanging an accusation of murder on the butts of a popular cigarette was flimsy, full of loopholes. Cross felt as if he was walking a thin thread. He went on. He lied.

"And, of course, McAndrews will have your fingerprints now. He can match them against those found in here. Your prints should not have been found here, Wagner. You've been out of the city for four months and the maid service in this building is excellent."

Wagner sagged, butted his cigarette, stood for several seconds with his back to Cross, his head down. Finally he turned and Cross steeled. Wagner looked composed and defiant. Then he smiled grimly.

"I didn't leave fingerprints, Mr. Cross. I wore gloves."

Cross drew on long-ago CIA training and experience. He forced himself to remain unmoved, but inside he was jubilant. He said, "You prevented a pending marriage?"

Wagner shook his head. "I settled an ancient score. A long time ago Andrew Farragut killed my parents." He drew a breath. "And you don't know how good it feels to have that score off my chest. Vengeance finally came. It has been years, but the time was never right until yesterday. I finally feel free."

"As the euphemism goes, Mr. Wagner — freedom has its price," Martin Cross said.

THE PATTERN OF MURDER

He saw the house in the darkness and the woman who waited. Beauty was here, and wealth beyond dreams, and—something else? Something like trackless Murder?

A Story You Won't Forget

by JEFFREY M. WALLMANN



SAM CULP drove through the entrance gates of Harvard Duquesne's estate, knowing only that the retired financier was gluttonously rich and was missing for the past nine days.

That was all he, or the police of two states, were sure of, other than the fact that Duquesne's Cadillac sedan had been found six days ago in Vergennes, Vermont, some hundred miles from his New Hampshire home.

It had evidently been abandoned, showed no signs of forcible entry, struggle, or stains, and the only

fingerprints were those of Harvard Duquesne, his wife, and a handyman. Nobody had seen the Cadillac enter Vergennes or a man answering Duquesne's description leaving, and nobody had yet been able to explain what the black car was doing in the small town.

Mrs. Katharine Duquesne had insisted their insurance company send an investigator, one who wouldn't track mud on her carpets as the police had, but one who would find her husband, as the police hadn't.

Northeastern Mutual, who held the bulk of Duquesne's insurance,

Featuring

SAM CULP.



Sam McNamee

took one look at the fifty-thousand-dollar double indemnity policy on his life and hired Universal Adjustment Bureau to supply one neat, well-dressed representative to mollify the distressed Mrs. Duquesne while investigating.

Universal Adjustment Bureau, however, assigned Samuel Culp. He was six feet, blue-grey eyed, clean and sober, and that afternoon was wearing his second best suit just back from the cleaners.

He knew his business. Perhaps too well; his features were seamed with the patina of pushing forty, and he had dealt with the wealthy too many times before to automatically extend them humble deference the way a younger operative might.

Culp stopped his car just inside the gravel drive, climbed out to close the massive iron gates. Their hinges squeaked in a subdued, polished manner, as if the sound had been built in to provide authenticity to their ornate 18th Century appearance.

Harvard Duquesne had been a boy wonder of the twenties, making his fortune in the great utility boom, and then with his brother had sidestepped the depression and continued a high-stake shell game of companies. Both brothers were reputed to be tough. One was either with them, in which case they were benevolently despotic, or against them, in which case they were coldly merciless. There was no middle sanctuary of noninvolvement when

dealing with them. The younger brother was still active, but Harvard had reputedly become overly obsessed with loyalties, angers, and perfection, and had retired, drinking heavily, before he collapsed.

The estate was literally Duquesne's retreat, a one-half mountain in the Presidential Range; hundreds of acres of woven lace greenery and crystal blue water. Culp drove along the narrow, meandering drive, wondering if the magnate had ever succeeded in finding any inner peace, now that he had cornered so much of the outer variety. Or whether he had found a more lasting, final peace somewhere out there, or still further out, past the gate and in the imperfect world he had helped to create.

Eventually the drive crested a bluff overlooking a vast, kidney-shaped lake, then it dipped downward steeply, ending beside a brick building and a wooden pier. The building looked as if it had once been a carriage house, recently converted to a two-stall garage with living quarters above. The grounds and building had the appearance of extreme tidiness, an unreal sterility as if every weed or stray bug had been removed.

A lean boy of eighteen or twenty, wearing a faded sweatshirt and blue jeans, was rolling a wheelbarrow of gravel across the clearing. He stopped as Culp pulled up.

"If you're looking for Bergmann," he said, wiping his hands

on his pants, "he's down on the dock."

"Thanks, but I came to see Mrs. Duquesne."

The boy grinned. "The Duquesnes live on an island. Leave your car in front of the first stall there, and Bergmann will take you across."

The dock was old, but was free of slime or smell, the wood smooth and glossy as if polished. Tied to one end was a stubby skiff, engineless, oarless, paintless, which seemed strangely out of place. Nearer was a sleek Century inboard-outboard cruiser, canvas covering three-quarters of its length. A heavy-set man with greying hair and mustache and wearing a clean white shirt and ducks stood in its stern. He answered to the name of Bergmann.

"Mr. Culp?" the man said, looking up with a smile. "See you met Kip, my summer helper. Cast off the lines and climb aboard, and I'll have you across in less than fifteen minutes."

On the way across the open water, he handed Culp a pair of binoculars and pointed out some of the attractions. The setting sun layered the placid water, only to become fractured gold veins in textured indigo marble when sliced by the boat's bow. Bergmann waxed as if the lake belonged to him rather than to his employer.

"She's two and a half by four miles, Mr. Culp, and in parts up to

eight hundred feet deep." He pointed in a port-side direction.

"Bet the fishing's good," Culp said. "Landlocked salmon, brown and rainbow trout. Love to take that old skiff out trolling."

"You sound just like Mr. Duquesne," Bergmann said. "I'm not one for fishing myself; it's too messy for my taste." Culp now knew who was responsible for the landing's pristine quality, and wasn't surprised when the caretaker followed up with: "Wish he'd get something besides that skiff. The new fiberglass ones don't take any upkeep and can be cleaned so easily. That boat's a scandal."

Culp smiled to himself and continued using the glasses. He loved it as he did anything unsullied by the stench and offal of urbanity, and thought for the first time there might be an affinity between him and the old man who had come here for solace and then disappeared. Then he caught a thin oil-slick riding the water's surface, residue from some infernal engine, and the blot ruined the view for him. Sadly he handed the glasses back and rode the rest of the way in silence.

The island was jagged, pyramidal shaped, and the home was built along a promontory overlooking a smaller dock and a cottage Bergmann said he lived in. The house was wild and sprawling, befitting the island, of Georgian brick and small-paneled dormers and a long ivy-clad

porch of fluted pilasters. Mrs. Duquesne answered the door, and after cursory introductions, ushered Culp inside.

Katherine Duquesne was a small-breasted, small-boned woman about Culp's age, dressed mannishly, her dark hair coiled thickly to the nape of her neck. She led the way to a spacious room intricate with Doric cornices and carved bookcases and oil portraits that were age-dulled to a uniform opaqueness.

In one corner was a glass-doored sideboard of golden oak, crowded with elephant miniatures. She reiterated what Culp already knew as she went, in a cool, aloof tone matched by a complete lack of smile. Culp felt as if he was being talked down to by her, as if smiles were only for guests and equals and not for the hired help.

"It's been a week ago last Tuesday," she wound up. "And I am not in the least satisfied with the efforts the police have been making."

"They have been doing all they can, Mrs. Duquesne," Culp said. "There's a missing persons alarm out in five states, and both Vermont and New Hampshire have all-points bulletins out with your husband's description."

"With luck the police will spot him, but out of the thousands of police, not one is actively searching. That's what I need, a full-time in-

vestigator to devote himself entirely to finding Harvard."

"I see." Culp rubbed his forehead, wondering if the headache that was coming on was the result of his long drive from Hartford or Mrs. Duquesne's attitude. "Now, as I understand it, your husband never told you where he was going or why that Tuesday morning."

"None whatsoever."

"And the next thing you knew his car was reported in Vergennes, Vermont almost three days later."

"I had alerted the police that Harvard was missing before then."

"And you're sure he never said anything to you and neither of you know anybody in Vergennes? There is absolutely no reason you can give for him to have left or to have gone there?"

"How many times must I tell you? No."

Culp realized that they were both becoming irritated with each other; he switched subjects for both their sakes. "Do you have a picture of your husband I could have?"

She walked to a large, gold-framed photograph which was propped up on the drop-leaf of a scrolled parlor desk. "Here, but I'm afraid I must ask for it back as it's the only one I have. I gave the few others I had to the police."

Culp studied the tall, impressive, white-haired man in his sixties who stared hawk-like out at him. He was reminded of portraits of World War



I British generals and their same air of imperious Victorian dignity. "What mood was your husband in when he left?"

"No different than usual."

"What is usual?"

"Harvard doesn't like to leave the estate, not even to go into Webster." Webster was a small village some seven miles away; Culp had driven through it on the way. "I would say he was reluctant, but not overly so," she concluded.

"You described him as wearing a grey suit, vest, and red striped tie," Culp said. "Would he wear that to go to Webster?"

"Harvard dresses impeccably all the time. He feels a man of his station should set an example."

"Was he carrying anything?"

"I didn't notice."

"Had he discussed anything with you in the previous week or so that might indicate his purpose? Was he worried over anything?"

"Harvard never discusses business with me."

"Oh, then it was business?"

"I don't know. Really, Mr. Culp, you're twisting things around."

"But you said he didn't like to leave the estate. Would he be willing to go on a social visit, especially without telling you?"

"I have personally checked with all our friends as well as the business acquaintances I can think of, and I gave a list to the police," she replied stiffly, not answering the question directly.

"Do you have any ideas of your own?"

"I have none."

"Mrs. Duquesne, was your husband drinking when he left?"

"Is your rudeness necessary, Mr. Culp?" She said it coldly, turning her head to glare like a bust of some Roman patrician being revolved on its pedestal for greater impact.

Culp took one look and placed the picture down on the desk. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Mrs. Duquesne. I don't think anybody can."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"It's too vague. Much too vague for me to be able to start an investigation."

The arched glare faded into concern, and she stood tight-lipped and swaying for a moment. Culp had the feeling that her rigid control was beginning to slip, that he could see a glimmer of the woman beneath, a woman living with torment. She asked unsteadily, "Are you calling me a liar, Mr. Culp?"

"No. I'm saying that with the information you've supplied, I don't have any better chance than the police. Decidedly a worse one, in fact, not having their facilities. I suggest you hope that they are lucky, Mrs. Duquesne, and that your husband hasn't had an accident, lost his memory, or is too badly injured to talk."

"He has identification," she said levelly, but the facade continued to crack, nervousness appearing in her pale eyes, her slender fingers clutching her throat, worrying a choker of pearls.

"Sometimes there's no identification left."

"You—you're just trying to scare me."

"You're already scared, Mrs. Duquesne. Why? What are you holding back? Either tell me or have Bergmann taxi me to my car so I can stop wasting both our times."

"Oh, God," she said dully and slumped in the nearest chair. She didn't move then, but Culp had the distinct impression that she was wrestling with herself inside. Finally, in a voice no longer regal, she said, "You're right. I am afraid. Can I trust you?"

"If it's legal."

"And if it isn't?"

"My license requires I keep the law. I do my best to protect the insurance company's clients, but there is always some risk."

There was another long pause before she decided.

"It's gone far enough," she told the room. "I have to trust somebody." She gestured toward the sideboard. "Mr. Culp, as you can see, we collect elephant miniatures. All sorts—ivory, jade, wood, crystal—any that strike our fancy. Some that are quite valuable. The reason Harvard left here that Tuesday was to purchase a very rare stone carving of the Indus Valley Culture at an extremely attractive price."

"Where was he going?"

"Burlington, Vermont. He learned of the figurine through his broth-

er, Stephan, and he refused to tell me any more than that. But when he left, he was carrying his black attache case, Mr. Culp. It contained twenty-seven thousand dollars in cash."

"In cash? Mrs. Duquesne, why haven't you notified the police of this?"

She looked down at her fingers, as though trying to will them to stop trembling. "Sometimes in a large business such as the one my husband and Stephan have, it is necessary to deal with people of—a baser sort. People of unsavory backgrounds, if you know what I mean. I have a suspicion Harvard was to meet just such a man."

"Mrs. Duquesne, are you trying to tell me your husband was buying stolen property? Is that why he took all that cash with him?"

She winced slightly. "I don't know. I don't know if the figurine was stolen or if the man Stephan was to introduce Harvard to was acting legitimately, or if it actually belonged to him. Harvard wouldn't tell me, and neither would Stephan, but their attitudes lead me to believe there was something secretive and not altogether honorable about the dealings."

"You've talked to your brother-in-law, then?"

"Of course, that very night when Harvard didn't come home. And quite a few times since then. But Stephan swears he only saw Har-

vard for a few moments to set up the meeting and that was all. He doesn't always tell me the truth, though. Stephan never . . . approved of me, I'm afraid."

She rose from the chair and went to the picture again, gazing at it softly. "We have a position to maintain, Mr. Culp," she continued. "I couldn't chance the police uncovering anything which might embarrass our standing or hurt the companies Stephan manages under the Duquesne name. Yet Harvard's been retired too long and is no longer emotionally equipped to involve himself in such matters again. He might have run into something he can no longer handle. Something which—" She didn't finish the sentence, only turned to face Culp again, her eyes gently moist.

There. It was out, like a lanced boil, and Culp liked it just about as much. But he nodded, feeling her eyes on him heavily. "All right, Mrs. Duquesne, I'll see what I can do. I can't guarantee anything, but I'll see."

"Thank you."

"Now, Stephan Duquesne is in Burlington. Is that right?"

"Yes. The general offices are still in New York, but it was decided when Harvard retired to move the head office closer."

"As I recall, Vergennes is close to Burlington."

"About twenty miles on the other side of it, south on Interstate Seven-

en." She added unnecessarily, "I've gotten to learn quite a bit about that town in the last few days."

"Was the meeting with this man to take place there?"

"Not according to Stephan. Harvard and the—seller were to meet in Harvard's motel room. Stephan said they did."

"Then it would seem that your husband was going somewhere else for another reason," Culp hazarded.

"Or coming back. As the Cadillac was on a side street, there's no way of telling in which direction he was heading."

Culp frowned, pinching the bridge of his nose. The headache was stronger, now a product of the assignment itself. "I think I will talk to your brother-in-law, Mrs. Duquesne. I'll drive to Burlington tomorrow. If I could have his address and phone number."

"Certainly. I hope you have more success with him than I have been able to." She took a piece of paper from one of the desk's pigeon holes and wrote on it with long, flowing script. "He's a very difficult man to see, however. I suggest letting me call him first." She handed the paper to Culp, a humorless smile on her lips. "We may not get along, but I'm still his brother's wife."

Culp left shortly afterward. Mrs. Duquesne was beside her husband's picture, looking at it. She seemed to have aged considerably in the last few minutes, crumpled and slumped,

ed, her eyes dull. The blank look of a deserted house.

ON THE WAY across the lake, Sam Culp questioned Bergmann. Yes, Mr. Duquesne had taken the Cadillac, but no, he hadn't mentioned anything in particular. The answers were civil but uncommunicative, leaving Culp on shore with the opinion that the caretaker was overly protective and loyal to the family.

Culp stopped at the first motel he came to, showered, and had a hard time falling asleep.

The Red Knight was a standard American expense account cocktail lounge decored in standard Old English Pub, with pseudo-Tudor beams and plaster and waitresses costumed in a Victorian lecher's dream of a chambermaid's uniform.

It was in the cellar of the Duquesne Building in downtown Burlington — "A better place to meet under the circumstances," as Stephan Duquesne had said when Culp had called him. "In its own way, far more private than my office."

Culp and Duquesne sat in a red plastic booth in the rear, ignoring the evening trade of junior executives and secretaries who momentarily crowded the lounge in search of dinner dates. Duquesne was toying with the plastic toothpick in his Gibson. He was a portly man wearing Harris tweeds and a harried expression, an unlit briar pipe clenched between his teeth like a mastiff grip-

ping a bone. His greying hair was clipped too short for a man of his age, as if he was trying to kid himself that he hadn't lost his youth. At the moment, Culp thought, Duquesne was trying to kid himself that he hadn't lost a brother.

"I agreed to see you," Stephan Duquesne said, removing the pipe, "but I told Kate I thought it was a mistake calling you in."

"Her husband's missing," Culp said. "Her husband and your brother. Naturally, she's worried."

"So am I, perhaps more so than she. But the police are most efficient and have the means of investigating quite thoroughly."

"The police don't know about the elephant."

"That transaction had nothing to do with it."

"It was the reason your brother came to Burlington with twenty-seven thousand dollars. He's been missing ever since, his car found just twenty miles away. I'd say it had everything to do with it."

"I've talked with the other man. I'm personally convinced he is telling the truth and isn't involved."

Culp looked at Duquesne, having a hard time liking him. Big money too often has a power, a life of its own which can't bear too close a scrutiny. But he couldn't excuse it, not the inverted sense of values that would place personal reputation above the safety of his own brother.

"That isn't good enough, Mr. Du-



quesne," he said. "I want to talk to the man myself."

Duquesne put his pipe back in his mouth and glared at Culp, but his face was sallow and his expression gradually falling, until finally he removed the pipe and sighed heavily, nodding.

"Yes, I was afraid of this. The minute Kate told me she'd confided in you, I anticipated you would insist." He slid ponderously toward the end of the booth. "Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Culp. I'll be right back."

He walked into the swirl of bodies as though it was a quagmire, burying him over his head. He was back almost immediately, returning with another man, a man he had obviously been keeping on ice, probably for some time at one of the bar stools. The man reminded Culp of a stereotyped bookkeeper; nervous, frail, with long, thin hands, pinched face. The man was continually smoothing back the few wisps of hair which lay across his head.

"As I say, I anticipated you," Duquesne said, slipping in the booth again, making room for the man. "My friend will remain nameless."

"I'm only interested in what happened to Harvard Duquesne," Culp said to the man. "That's all."

"Well, I saw him that Tuesday night," the man said. There was perspiration on his upper lip like a pale, beaded mustache. "But I didn't sell him the—anything. I had been offered more that same morning, and in my business it's who's the first with the most, to coin a phrase." He grinned self-consciously.

"It was too late to reach my brother, though we tried," Duquesne interjected. "Harvard was most upset."

"I want to hear it from him," Culp said, and then asked the man, "Now, where was this?"

"In his room at the C'an Juan Motel, over by Lake Winooski. As Mr. Duquesne said, his brother was most upset, to say the least. He'd been drinking and became belligerent, and when I called Mr. Duquesne here, he took the phone away from me. He was very abusive."

"What did he say?"

The man looked at Stephan Duquesne questioningly.

"Go on," Duquesne urged. "Imagine I'm not here."

Culp doubted that the man would ever do that. The man swallowed. "Well, he told Mr. Duquesne that he was sick of him, almost as sick

of him as he was his wife. And he called me a double-crosser." The man raised his eyebrows. "It wasn't a double-cross, only business. I think it was the liquor in him talking; he was drinking continually. I left right after he hung up."

"When was that?"

"Seven-thirty, quarter to eight, I'd say."

"You have no idea what he did after that?"

"I'm sorry, no. The last I saw of him he was mixing another drink. Pardon my saying so, Mr. Duquesne, but your brother, he'd drink himself wherever he was going."

"It's all right," Duquesne said, and Culp sensed that it was. Now. He was no longer able to carry the weight of his brother on the shoulders of his own hollow honor; he leaned on the table as if bent in the middle.

"And the money?" Culp asked the man.

"I never saw it. As I said, there was no deal."

Culp continued to query the man, but if he knew anything more, he was either too scared or too shrewd to be tripped up. Culp let him go, reserving the right to question him again; Duquesne had no other alternative but to agree. The man faded into the crowd gratefully, just another shadow in a world of blindness, where money is heard but not seen and as sticky as fog.

Culp turned to Duquesne then.

"Your brother is a sick man."

"He has problems."

"Drinking problems for a start.
Psychiatric for another?"

"A harsh term, Mr. Culp. Harvard was always a driven man and found a great deal of satisfaction in business. But the time came when the business became so large as to be an entity unto itself, and he couldn't tamper with its self-perpetuation without losing more than he gained. That's why he retired, and I'm afraid he never found a suitable substitute. He's driven, but without direction now. Kate hasn't helped matters either."

"In what way?"

"Men like Harvard, his age and temperament, are apt to be vulnerable to women like Kate, and women like her are apt to be deceptive."

"In other words, you consider her selfish, mercenary?"

"She nags Harvard unmercifully for things. She's the one who put him up to buying the elephant when I unfortunately mentioned I'd heard of it. She didn't tell you that, did she?"

"No."

"Harvard had had it with her. He told me so many times."

"Was your brother planning to leave his wife?"

Duquesne chuckled hollowly. "Oh my, no. Not and give up that estate of his. That was his sanctuary, Mr. Culp. He would have seen to

it that she left him, a move I frankly have long foreseen."

"And you? He was planning to remove you as well?"

"Momentary anger," he replied, sluffing it off with a wave of his hand. "He was drinking and frustrated and mad at the whole world."

"Would you inherit control if your brother died?"

"I resent that," Duquesne said, stiffening upright. "It is none of your damned business."

"I hope so," Culp said. "Do you have any idea what your brother was doing in Vergennes?"

"No. The only explanation I can think of is that when he drinks heavily, he has been known to go most any place, stopping whenever he gets thirsty."

"Ten days is along time for a bender."

"Too long, Mr. Culp," Duquesne said, his jaw setting. "And my brother would never walk when he could drive, either."

"Do you think he's dead?"

The younger brother didn't answer, but a distant look came into his eyes, the look of a man seeing inward rather than out. A man unsettled by what he saw.

"Do you think your man might be involved?" Culp pressed.

"I've known him too long to believe he'd have the guts."

"For twenty-seven thousand?"

"For twenty-seven thousand dollars it wouldn't be worth the risk;

for two hundred and seventy thousand I wouldn't turn my back on him."

"What about Katherine Duquesne?"

"She couldn't have, not with the car in Vergennes. Besides, she's the one who called you to investigate. Don't be absurd."

But that inward look was deeper than ever. Culp doubted that Stephan Duquesne considered the idea of his sister-in-law as a murdereress absurd at all.

"Mr. Culp, I've taken a risk. How do I know you'll be discreet?"

"You don't, Mr. Duquesne. But you don't have the choice. You never really did."

SAM CULP declined a dinner invitation which wasn't meant to be accepted, and left Duquesne mentally wiping his brow by drinking another Gibson very fast. He looked up the C'an Juan Motel in the phone book, consulted his street map, and drove across town.

The C'an Juan was white stucco walls and red tile roof and black stained wood, stretching along Burlington's lake on a shoreline of grass the color of money. It would have fitted in with the orange juice stands of Southern California, but in upper Vermont it stuck out like a foreign country's culture exhibit. The lobby had uncomfortable furniture arranged like way-stations along the side of the rug running

between entrance and desk, and the night manager wore a scarlet tor-eador jacket and an expression of embarrassment for wearing it.

Culp checked in—he needed a room to stay for the night anyway—and asked about Harvard Duquesne. The manager was reticent, as Mr. Duquesne always stayed at the C'an Juan when in town, but eventually admitted he had stayed there ten nights ago, but had hurriedly checked out around nine the same evening. The bartender in the lounge there remembered nothing, not even with a five dollar bill as incentive.

Culp went to his room and brooded. To him, tracking was similar to stringing beads; the bead of one incident led to another along a string of habit patterns until an accident or violence broke the string and scattered the beads. In this case, Culp had three impressions of Harvard Duquesne—family man, bitter man, irrational drunk—and the man's intentions would be different depending on which, if any, he was.

For the moment, Culp decided to play along with Stephan Duquesne and his friend. The fact that Harvard Duquesne had checked out an hour and a half after the nervous little man said he had left, and according to the manager, had walked out alone, tended to corroborate the story. The man, perhaps with friends, could have been waiting to relieve Duquesne of the money, but

that possibility could wait until after a few others were removed. Besides, Stephan Duquesne was so sure about the man's innocence; Culp wondered darkly if he was too sure for some other, unexplained reason.

Culp spent the balance of the night driving Interstate 7 between Burlington and Vergennes, describing Duquesne and his condition to as many bars and cocktail lounges along the way he could find. The police had already been over the fround, and many of the places remembered them flashing a picture, but Culp got the same answer everywhere: a disinterested stare and a bored shake of the head. This part of his job had always been the most dejecting, greying of all to Culp; he retired after the bars closed smarting from smoke and bloated from soft drinks, loathing night life in general and Duquesne in particular.

The next morning it was impossible to continue with the bars, so he toured the service stations and motels, working on the possibility Duquesne might have stopped at one or the other, more gassed than his car. When he had blanketed Interstate 7 going south, he worked his way north. He got to Swanton, just below the Canadian border, in mid-afternoon, figured he was chasing a dead end, and returned to Burlington utterly disgusted.

He ate dinner at the C'an Juan, mulling over in his mind the total



absence of reason for Duquesne having driven to Vergennes from the motel, considering for a moment what Mrs. Duquesne had said in passing: perhaps her husband was coming back from some place.

From where? Why? Then he thought about the younger brother's odd uneasiness concerning his sister-in-law, thought about the impossibility of the car being in Vergennes if she had been responsible.

It was too late to drive beyond Vergennes, start searching further southward. Culp decided to concentrate on the absurd. He began checking the bars and service stations along Interstate 2 on the other side of Burlington, the highway on which he—and eleven days earlier, Harvard Duquesne—had driven to the city, the highway that stretched eastward, back toward the mountain estate.

Five miles outside Burlington, an attendant at a large Amoco station remembered a black Cadillac, though not the driver. He showed the dent in one of the pumps where the car had fishtailed into it. It had happened around nine-thirty a couple of Tuesdays ago, he said, in and out before he had a chance to get out of his office. It wasn't much, but it was more than Culp had before.

Culp wasn't able to find where Duquesne had stopped for gas later, but his next break came ten miles later. The bartender in "Cristobal's" recalled having to throw out a well-dressed man with a loud, dirty mouth, a man who fitted Culp's description. Culp now had a direction if not intention. Just before midnight he found another roadhouse where Duquesne had stopped, and then another in Montpelier, the capitol city of Vermont.

Interstate 2 went on to St. Johnsbury after Montpelier, but by then Culp figured he had the pattern, and he cut off and headed toward Woodsville. When he located another bar in Barre, he knew he'd been right. Woodsville, Webster, and home. Home to Katherine.

Culp overslept, arriving at the estate landing at noon the following day after being rousted by the motel maid in Webster. He was in a bad humor, for he'd run a frustrating circuit, a wheel within a wheel, and he didn't like what he

saw ahead of him. Nor the cautious approach he was going to have to take in order to close that circle for good.

Bergmann was sitting on a three-legged stool, mending a rent in a long piece of canvas.

"Hold on until I finish, and I'll take you across," he said.

"No hurry." Culp looked out over the lake, smelling the crisp air, but New Hampshire had lost much of its pure, unspoiled nature for him now. His back to Bergmann he casually asked: "Suppose Mr. Duquesne had returned late that Tuesday night. Would you have taken him across?"

"I told you before, Mr. Culp. He never came back."

"I know, but suppose. You and Mrs. Duquesne were on the island. He would have had to call one of you to fetch him in the cruiser."

"I suppose," Bergmann admitted. "Or else used the skiff. But last Tuesday night the cruiser was docked here. I would have heard him, though. I'm a light sleeper."

Culp looked at the cruiser as if it could give him the answers. It was here, he thought. And the skiff . . .

He probed mentally, not satisfied, sensing inconsistencies. "How could the cruiser have been here if you and Mrs. Duquesne were on the island?"

Bergmann placed the canvas on the dock and stood, stretching.

"When there's things to be gotten in Webster first thing in the morning, Kip keeps the cruiser. He sleeps over the garage, and—"

"The boy!" Culp saw the whole answer now; he grasped it, worked it, hammered it into shape. "Where is he, Bergmann?"

"In the garage, sweeping. But I thought you wanted to see the Missus, Mr. Culp."

"I do," Culp said, heading for the garage. "Later." A wheel within a wheel, he'd figured, but not so. Not so at all.

Kip was prodding a line of dirt across the floor. He stopped and leaned on his broom as Culp approached.

"Bergmann's down on the dock," Kip said.

"And Harvard Duquesne is in the lake, right?" Culp said harshly.

It was the boy's eyes, ferret's eyes with a faraway sheen which widened into shallow pools, that convinced Culp he'd struck home.

"Hey, stop kidding around like that, mister," Kip said and began to sweep again nervously. "That isn't funny."

"But it's true, Kip." Culp placed his foot in front of the broom. "Duquesne woke you up to take him across in the cruiser didn't he? He was dead drunk and angry, angry enough to spill all about his abortive trip and the money he still had with him. It was the money, wasn't it? Twenty-seven thousand in cash

in the hands of a man who had disappeared momentarily, who had returned here without anybody knowing it. So you killed him and dumped his body in the lake."

"N-no . . . No . . ." the boy stammered.

"I heard what you said, Mr. Culp," Bergmann said, coming up behind. "Have you gone crazy? I told you, Mr. Duquesne never came home that night."

"Not home, Bergmann," Culp said grimly. "I thought so at first, that you or Mrs. Duquesne or perhaps the two of you together had picked him up. But you couldn't have. You had no way off the island until Kip came over the next morning. But he got here."

"He never — No, he never!"

"I should have seen it sooner," Culp continued. "Soon as Bergmann told me Mr. Duquesne liked to fish, but he hated it. How could Mr. Duquesne troll for trout in a skiff without an outboard? How could he use it in lieu of the cruiser to get him home? There's no outboard on that skiff, but there has to have been one; a low-horsepowered two-cycle one as old as the skiff, I bet. Where is that outboard, Kip?"

"H-how would I know?"

"Because you used it to weight down Duquesne's body. You had to have something heavy, but Bergmann keeps everything clean and in place. Everything, that is, except the fishing equipment he detests and

Duquesne used by himself. It was a perfect choice, because that outboard would never be missed."

"Y-you can't prove it."

"Yes, I can, Kip, and I don't have to have the police drag the whole lake to do it, either. A two-cycle engine runs on a mixture of gas and oil, and if the outboard hit bottom only partially upright, some of the mix would seep out of the air hole in its tank cap. And it did, Kip, out there in the deep section. When I first arrived, Bergmann loaned me his binoculars, and I saw its oil slick riding on the surface. Or didn't you know that oil floats on water?"

"Kip, I can't believe you—" Bergmann's voice choked. "Show him the outboard, boy. Show it to him before he gets the cops."

"He can't," Culp said. "Not without a body attached."

Kip's lips stretched like ivory bands around bared teeth; the time for talking was over. Culp saw his eyes shift and the boy's shoulders hunch, and ducked, going inside a right swing that was sent like a pitcher's overhand throw. The boy staggered sideways, off balance, and Culp tried to hold him in an arm lock but was only partially successful. The broom handle got entangled somehow, and Kip flung himself backward, half crazed with fury and terror.

Culp waited and chopped the boy in the belly with a right. It was like

hitting a slab of concrete; the boy was in prime condition and Culp wasn't, and Culp had nearly twice the years and half the wind. But Culp knew what he was doing. He blocked a left with his right forearm and countered with a left of his own, an uppercut which turned the snarling face to the ceiling.

Culp stepped in with a right and then another left, a hook with all his weight behind it, which sent the boy down. Kip rolled over and got up, then fell back again. Culp reached down for him, grabbing an unresisting collar.

Bergmann stopped Culp's ram. "Hold it. He's only a boy."

"Boy, hell," Culp muttered. "He's old enough to have murdered."

Kip crouched, eyes glittering with the current of malice, face a distorted mirror of the hard jungle in which he had created to live. He was still that way when the police arrived from Webster.

When Culp was able, he reported to Mrs. Duquesne. She was standing on the bluff outside her home, watching the dragging operation. Culp, disliking heights, talked to her from a wrought-iron patio chair some feet back from the edge. Her back was to him, and her arms were crossed and hugging her shoulders. He wondered if she was hearing anything he was saying.

"At least," she said when he was done, "at least Harvard was coming home."

"Yes, he was that," Culp said softly.

She turned then, glancing at him and then down at her wedding rings.

"You know, I had the silly notion he had left me, gone somewhere to file for divorce. I wanted you to find him to save our marriage, not because I thought anything like this might have happened. I wasn't a very good wife to Harvard, not the kind of support he needed."

She turned back to the lake, blinking her eyes rapidly. When she spoke again, Culp did not fully understand, but he accepted it, because her logic was enough for her. It was the sum total of her. "But I really did love him," she said.

Kip subsequently confessed after Duquesne was fished out of the lake, the small outboard motor attached to him by its safety chain. The murder weapon, a wrench, hadn't been discovered and it probably never would. Kip had thrown it over the side of the launch with the body. The money was dug up not far from the garage.

The boy explained that he had

driven the Cadillac to Vergennes as cover, a red herring to confuse the police and send them in the wrong direction. He had caught busses back, then phoned a friend to pick him up. The friend never suspected the story Kip had told him was false. He had been up all night, the boy related, but for twenty-seven grand he would have done a hell of a lot more.

A hell of a lot more, and ended up with nothing. A day later Sam Culp sat in his Hartford office and stared moodily at his typewriter and the Form 37, Claim Investigation Report, that was rolled in it. That's what life seemed to boil down to these days, a bunch of triplicated form—and in this case, death as well, for later he would have to file a Death Claim Report, Form 12, so that the beneficiary could collect more than ashes and dust.

A hell of a lot more, and Culp wondered if it ever was worth it. It was a question he often asked afterwards and never dared to answer. Another minute slipped by and then he began to tap the keys.

PIED PIPER CALLING

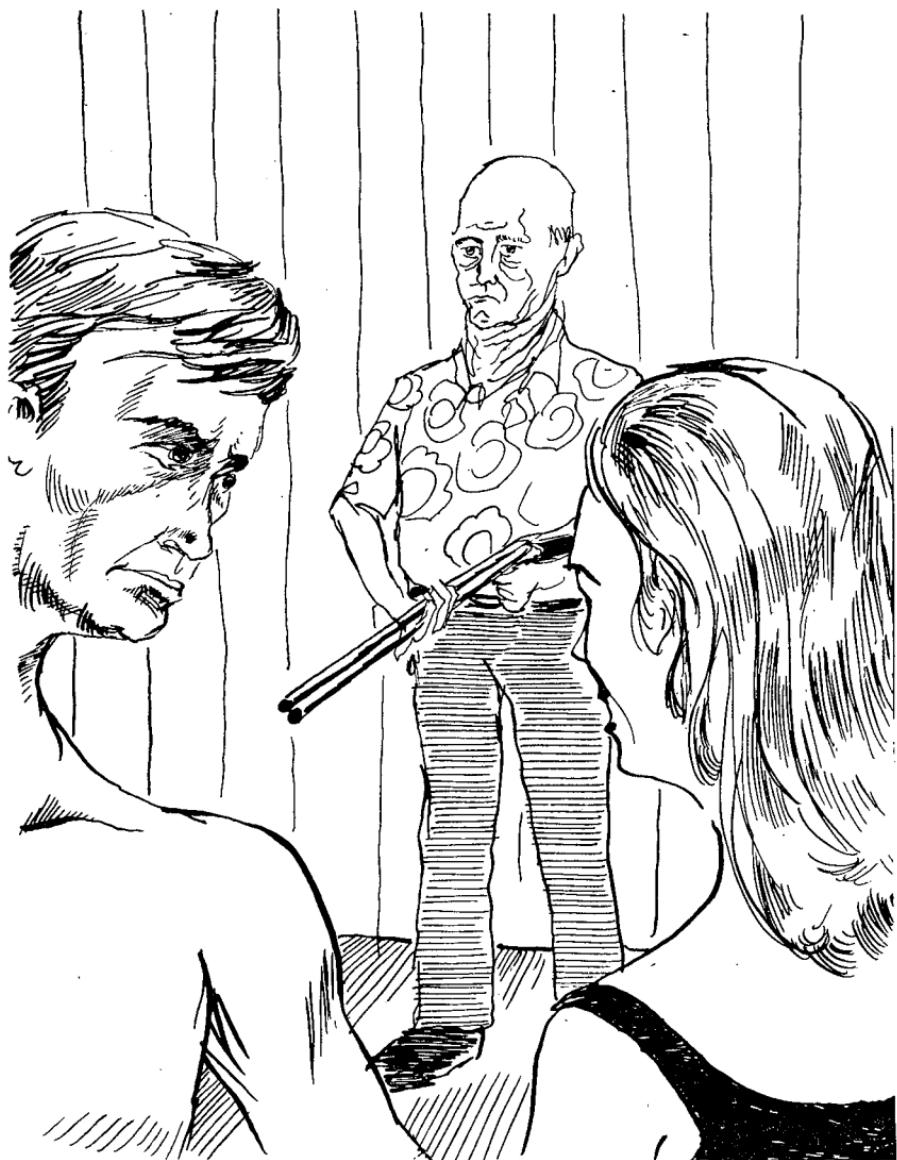
by Edward Y. Breese

It's JOHNNY HAWK!

It's Hard-Hitting!

It's Coming Soon!

A Chilling Suspense Novelet by a Very Fine Writer



THE SOUND OF SCREAMING

When you're tarred with the brand of a murder you didn't commit, two things are left to a man. Give up a hopeless fight — or gamble all to stay alive!



by EDWARD D. HOCH

DAVID BREEZE stepped off the northbound bus at two o'clock on a sunny June afternoon, glanced both ways and then crossed the nearly deserted street to the one-story brick building that served as the town's bus terminal.

A sleepy-eyed man glanced up from the counter as he approached, tapped his yellowed teeth with a pencil and asked, "Can I help you, mister?"

Breeze glanced around the deserted waiting room. "I was to meet a man named George here. Did you

notice anybody waiting for the bus?"

He chewed on the pencil a moment before replying. "Yeah, I guess there was a guy around. I think he went back to use the phone."

"Thanks." David Breeze shifted the suitcase to his left hand and followed the man's vague gesture to the rear of the waiting room. There he found a corridor running to the back door, lined with more phone booths than the little bus terminal would ever need.

The man he'd come to meet was

sitting in the third booth, his head thrown back in an attitude of intent listening. A narrow steel shaft that might have been a knitting needle had been driven through his throat.

David Breeze noted all this in a single instant, then turned and walked back past the sleepyeyed attendant.

"Find him?"

"No. I guess he got tired of waiting."

The man nodded sympathetically. "Some days you could die of old age waiting for that bus to come in."

Outside, the afternoon heat seemed suddenly oppressive.

The house belonged on a high cliff overlooking the pounding ocean. It belonged in somebody's nightmare, but not his. He hated it the moment he saw it—hated the turreted corners of the roof, the great gray vastness of its sides, the somber sweep of its steep front steps. He hated even the waters of Cape Cod Bay that splashed listlessly onto the long expanse of sandy beach to the rear. Hated then, perhaps, because that cliff was lacking.

The house had been in the Quinn family for more generations than anybody cared to remember. For all its ugliness, it maintained a certain advantage in being anti-New England—anti-architecture, even.

The Quinn family had never been ones to trace anything back to the pilgrims, and if the community oc-

casionally cast scornful remarks at the great house on the beach, it was all to their liking. Now, when war and marriage and death had gradually decimated the clan, the house was occupied only by Ruth Quinn and her mother, with an occasional cleaning lady recruited from town to keep the place looking barely respectable.

It was Ruth who answered the door when Breeze rang. She looked younger than thirty-five and prettier than he last remembered her.

"Dave! Dave Breeze! What are you doing here?"

He stepped across the threshold and gave her his best smile, as if nothing at all had ever happened between them. "Hello, Ruth. How have you been?"

"I—Fine, but—"

"But what am I doing here."

"Well, yes." Her eyes still held a flicker of mystery, and the curve of her full red lips still promised an unspoken question.

"I was under the impression that you'd sent for me."

"Sent for you?" She still seemed at a loss for words, but she gestured toward the living room. "Come in, anyway. Mother will be wondering who's at the door."

He followed her through a heavy beaded curtain that crackled on contact. He remembered it from his last visit, five years before, remembered thinking it would go better in a Chinese brothel. So would Ruth's mother, for that matter.

Angela Quinn hadn't really changed in those five years. She'd only grown a bit more so. More middle-aged, more flashy, more settled into the routine of her days.

Nearly sixty, she still spent an overly large portion of each morning coating her face with too-obvious layers of powder and rouge and eye makeup. Now, seeing her after those years, he was surprised at an addition to the ensemble.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Quinn."

"Well. David Breeze, isn't it?"

"That's right. I see you've taken up knitting."

The steel needles clashed and dove, catching the occasional sparkle of sunlight from the west window overlooking the water. Somehow they seemed out of place in Angela Quinn's dubious hands. "Yes, yes. A little embroidery, needlepoint, that sort of thing. Takes my mind off things. You've been away a long time."

"Five years."

"You're very pale."

"There's not much sunshine in a prison cell."

"No, I suppose not." The blackened lids came down over her eyes for a moment, as if she was trying to recall something. Or forget it. "In any event, it's good to see you back. You young people run along now." She still thought of them as they'd been so long ago, on the hazy summer vacations when all people were young and nobody thought about things like murder.



"Come on, Dave," Ruth said, pulling him along. She seemed anxious to be away from her mother.

He followed her to the little private sitting room that had always been Ruth's very own. With the passage of years it had become like everything else, pale and a bit musty with disuse. He remembered the nights when they had fumbled at lovemaking here, the days when they'd been content to sit cross-legged in the big bay window overlooking the water. They'd been kids together during those years, even when they were already in their

mid-twenties and beyond. Good years, ones to remember.

"It's pretty much the same," he said, surveying the room with a familiar eye.

"I had no reason to change it." She sat down opposite him with a strange formality the room had never known. "Now — you said you thought I'd sent for you. Why?"

He took a letter from his pocket and passed it to her. "I received this three days ago." He knew it now by heart, and his mind ran along the words as she read them.

Dear Mr. Breeze:

I am writing you at the request of an old friend, Miss Ruth Quinn. She badly needs to see you, about an extremely personal matter which cannot be discussed on the telephone. If you can come here, please be on the bus that arrives at one o'clock Thursday afternoon. I will be awaiting you at the bus terminal. Sincerely,

Mr. George

She finished reading it and looked up sharply. "Why, I don't know any Mr. George! I never asked anybody to write you!"

He shrugged and took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "I was suspicious, but I was hoping it was on the level. I guess I just wanted to see you again."

She ignored the overture and passed the letter back to him. "Was this Mr. George at the bus station to meet you?"

It was the question he'd been fearing. "If he was, he didn't contact me. The bus was an hour late and maybe he got tired of waiting." Then, with a casual glance while lighting his cigarette, he asked, "How long has your mother been knitting, anyway?"

"Oh, you know mother. Knitting this week, drinking the next. She goes through phases."

"With steel needles?"

"She tried the plastic and they kept breaking on her. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I was just wondering. Could she have sent for me?"

"I'm sure she didn't write that foolish letter, if that's what you're thinking." She went to the window and stared out at the blue waters of the bay. "Are you still as good a swimmer as ever, Dave?"

"I didn't get much chance to practice in prison."

She kept staring toward the water, perhaps watching the breezy ripples or the occasional swooping birds. "You're bitter, aren't you?"

"What would you expect?"

"All right. Come on. Let's go for a swim."

"I don't have a suit."

"We'll find you one. Come on."

There was a sparkle in her eyes he didn't remember, something foreign to those years they'd spent together. Perhaps they'd just grown up, both of them. Perhaps they were different people now.

She called out something to her

mother, some casual reassurance from the old days of midnight dates and moonlight swims. As he followed her outdoors, he felt again the soft slither of sand underfoot. And if he listened closely to the wind off the water he might almost hear again the girlish laughter, the tinkle of ice cubes in tall frosted glasses, the long sigh of summer slipping by. They were different people now, but the place was the same as it had been five years ago. Exactly the same.

"You're thinking again," she said at his side.

"I guess I've got a lot to think about."

It had been the climax of the best summer he'd ever known, a summer filled with long days of skin diving with Ruth among the reefs and wrecks of the bay, with long nights of drinking and parties and half-made plans for the future.

Dave was working for his master's degree and doing some teaching on the side, after an education interrupted by four years in the air force. That summer was a time for relaxing, and sometimes he relaxed a little too much.

He'd been found dead drunk that night, when Ruth's little speedboat, riding without lights, had cut through the bow of another craft. He remembered the crunch of metal against wood, the terrifying sound of Ruth's scream in his right ear, and then the screams of the others,

the two early-morning fishermen in the other boat.

After that it was clearer. He remembered the moment of blind panic, remembered his hands spinning the wheel and heading the boat away from the drowning men while all the time Ruth sobbed at his side.

The men had both drowned before help could reach them, and Ruth Quinn had telephoned the police from shore to turn Dave in. She'd testified at his trial that he'd been blind drunk while driving the boat, that they'd both heard the men screaming after the crash, that she'd begged him to turn back but he hadn't.

During the five years he'd served in prison for manslaughter, she'd visited him only once, at the beginning. He'd asked her that day why she had testified against him, and she'd only said, "I had to live with myself, Dave. I had to live with myself and not with the memory of those two drowning men. I'm sorry."

But now, walking next to her on the beach once more, feeling the familiar sand beneath his feet, it might never have happened. They might have been back in the dreams of yesterday, where nobody worried about anything except the next drink or the nearest girl.

"Do you think you'll ever forgive me, Dave?" she asked now, and it was almost all right again.

"I think maybe some day."

"I'm glad." And then, "Want to

change into a suit? There's probably an extra one in the bathhouse."

He nodded and went toward the little shingled structure, somehow standing so incongruous before the great old house. Beyond, linking sand and sea like a rumpled bridge, was the old pier with a low, sleek inboard at its end. Ruth headed out to check the gasoline while he went into the bathhouse and began slipping out of his clothes. The blue trunks he found were tight on him, but they'd have to do.

When he returned to the pier, Ruth was nowhere in sight. After a moment she appeared, wearing a black one-piece bathing suit that showed she still had good legs. Her long blonde hair was unfastened and wild, rippling in the breeze like the waiting waters of the bay.

He helped her into the boat, conscious of her bare thigh brushing against his. She hesitated only a moment and then slid into the right-hand seat, behind the wheel.

"Yes, you drive," he said, reading her thoughts. "I don't think I'd want to try it quite yet."

"That's foolish after all these years, Dave."

"The boat's too much like that other one."

"Same craft, newer model. It's got power." She flipped the starter and the engine rumbled into life. In another moment they were skimming across the water, taking the waves head-on.

"I thought we were going for a swim," he said.

"We are. I just want to—"

They were still in sight of the house, and as Ruth turned the wheel to meet an oncoming wave, she'd caught sight of something.

"What's the matter?"

"There's a car pulling up back there."

"Just a visitor for your mother, I suppose. Or one of your boy friends."

But she wasn't joking. "It's a state police car."

His heart skipped a beat. They were on his trail already. "How can you be sure at this distance?"

"I am sure. What could they want?"

She'd taken the craft in a slow, wide circle that swept it parallel with the shoreline. He saw at once that she'd been right, recognizing now the big gold shield painted on the car door.

"They're looking for me."

"You? But why?"

"You're sure you don't know anyone named Mr. George?"

"Of course I'm sure. The only George I know is George Parker."

"I remember that name."

"He used to run a health camp, a long time ago."

"An old man. The one at the bus terminal was younger, not more than forty, anyway."

"I thought you said there was no one at the bus terminal."

"I said no one contacted me. But

somebody was there, dead in a phone booth."

She slowed the boat to a stop and turned off the ignition. "God, Dave! You're not kidding me, are you? You wouldn't kid me?"

"I wouldn't kid you," he said.

Overhead, a lonesome gull circled and dipped against the breeze.

His words seemed to have decided her. She started the boat and circled aimlessly for a few more moments, watching the distant police car in the drive. When at last it drove off she headed the boat back to shore.

Angela Quinn was waiting for them on the dock as they edged carefully into the mooring. In the slanting shadows of early evening she was still an imposing figure, a mother image for Dave as well as for Ruth. The heavy layers of make-up seemed now not so intense, the facial contortions not quite so demanding. Like many women, she looked better in the shadow.

"Did you hear the news?" she shouted out, while the boat was still some feet from the dock on the suddenly calm waters. "Sam McGill's been murdered!"

"Not Sam!" Ruth gasped out, though somehow Dave Breeze felt she wasn't too surprised. Perhaps it was the name she'd expected to hear.

Her mother nodded. "At the bus station, this afternoon. He was stabbed to death in a telephone booth, of all places. Can you imagine?"



Dave Breeze could imagine, quite well. "Who was he? The name's vaguely familiar, but I can't quite place it."

Ruth answered, stooping to tie the craft to its meal moorings. "Sam McGill was a family friend. You never really knew him, but he was the brother of one of those fishermen you killed."

So here we go, back again. Back in time to that awful night. Sam McGill, brother of a man named Harry McGill, whom he'd never met, but whose death he'd caused in a single blind drunken moment he couldn't even remember clearly.

Had Sam McGill written him under the name of Mr. George, and if so, why? What message did he have, and who had reached him in that phone booth first.

"Why did the police come here?" Dave asked Angela Quinn.

"He was a family friend, as Ruth told you."

Ruth Quinn sighed and walked past her mother, heading up the beach toward the big old house. She seemed almost to have forgotten Dave until he fell in step with her as they reached the grass.

"What is it?" he asked. "You're disturbed."

"Maybe I just don't like the thought of the whole town knowing my mother acted like a tramp."

"With McGill?"

She nodded. "That's why the police came here. They weren't looking for you." And then, "I suppose I should be glad he's dead."

"Don't ever be glad that anyone's dead," Breeze said, and he paused to look out at the bay where gulls dipped and played, and the sun was low in the evening sky. It was such a peaceful place.

"Tell me about it," he said, standing close to her by the window, watching Angela Quinn wandering aimlessly along the beach. "How did it happen with them?"

"I don't know. How do things like that happen? We'd known him slightly, of course, as we knew most people in the area. After the accident — well, he started coming around. I went out with him a few times, because he was closer to my age than mother's. But when I began to lose interest he switched to her. Maybe she was flattered, maybe she'd always been waiting for something like that. I don't know. All I know is that it sickened me."

Dave Breeze lit a cigarette and

continued staring out the window. "I think Sam McGill sent me that letter. If only I knew why."

"I can't imagine."

"It had something to do with the past. Something to do with his dead brother and what happened five years ago. What about the other fisherman who was killed?"

"Ray Winton. He worked up at the health camp."

"I remember now." He wondered how he could ever have forgotten either of them, even after five years. "That health camp. You mentioned George Parker before."

"I said he was the only George I knew."

"Was he friendly with Sam McGill?"

"They knew each other."

Dave Breeze ran a damp palm over his forehead. "I want to talk with George Parker."

"Why? What for?"

"The police didn't come here looking for me—not yet. But they will. I'm an ex-convict just out of prison and I've got any number of twisted reasons for hating the brother of a man I killed five years ago."

"If you didn't kill him—"

"Do you think I did?"

"No. Of course not!" But her reply was a bit too hasty. He felt like telling her about the steel knitting needle that had been the murder weapon. Perhaps that would have shaken her.

"I just want to see Parker, that's all."

"I'll take you over first thing in the morning. It's too late now."

They stayed by the window, watching the sunset across the bay, and he knew he could have kissed her then. But it was too soon. Even after five years it was too soon.

DAVID BREEZE had forgotten what mornings on the bay were like, forgotten the mingled odor of sand, water and sun that drifted over the dunes with the first light of dawn. He'd forgotten how the wind rippled through the tall green grass on the tops of the hills, and sent the wakened birds off in great spiral paths toward the sky.

In the boat once more, with Ruth behind the wheel, it was if he'd never been away. The salt spray stung their skin, leaving an uncomfortable stickiness he longed to wash off. But though they wore their suits, Ruth made no mention of swimming. They were journeying across a narrow arm of the bay toward a wooded point on the distant shore.

"We're going straight to Parker's place?" he asked.

"To the old health camp. He still lives there."

Dave Breeze remembered it then, as they drew near enough to make out the aging, paint-peeled buildings on the hill. Parker's Health Camp had never been the place for him, and in his youth it had served only as the butt of adolescent jokes tossed about at bars and beach parties. It was a place for old men trying

to recapture the sexual vigor of youth, a place for queers and oddballs to engage in every sort of forbidden activity, a place—in their wilder fancies—where criminals and master spies could live unseen for years in secret magnificence.

Ruth brought the boat to dock with seasoned skill, and they started the long climb up a row of narrow steps that had been laboriously cut from the dirt of the steep hillside.

"It's quite rundown these days," she said. "It's been closed for years, of course, and I hear he'd like to sell it."

When they finally reached the nearest of the one-story wooden buildings, they found the weeds and grass grown high with neglect. The door was stuck, but after a moment's pushing Dave managed to get it open.

"Not locked," he said. "Just stuck."

"Lead the way."

"Do you really think he's still living here?"

"He's here," she answered. "Damn! This is no place to run around barefooted!"

He moved through the dreary interior at her side, careful of the random piles of junk that dotted the floor. They passed through another doorway, into a sort of gymnasium where rows of dusty barbells lined the floor in uniform arrangement. The sight of it depressed him somehow, and he hopped

across to the dirty window, hoping for a reassuring view of the bay. But the place seemed ringed with concealing trees.

"His office is this way," Ruth told him, motioning toward an enclosed passageway that connected with the next building.

"What kind of health camp was this, anyway? Didn't they ever go outside?"

"They were old men, mostly. Don't you remember the stories?" she asked with a little giggle.

"I remember them." He followed her into a long hallway, lined on either side with tiny bedrooms for the long-vanished guests. All of the doors stood open and in most rooms the bare mattress springs reflected a feeling and sense of exhaustion. Only two of the rooms seemed occupied, at the very end of the corridor. But both beds were empty now.

They entered a little office that showed evidence of recent occupation. Papers were spread on the desk in haphazard fashion, ash trays brimmed with half-smoked cigarette butts, and a paper cup still held coffee dregs in its bottom. Dave casually checked the cigarette butts for lipstick, but both brands in the ash trays were clean. He wondered what the lipstick would have proven if he'd found it.

"Why does he stay here?"

"I don't know," she answered. "Perhaps it's a sort of health camp

for him, too. He's an old man, you know."

Behind him, a loose board suddenly creaked a warning. Dave Breeze spun around and saw the twin barrels of a shotgun pointed at his stomach. The weapon was held loosely in the wrinkled hands of a balding man with a weatherbeaten face.

"Just don't move," he snarled, "or I'll plaster your insides against the wall."

Ruth Quinn stepped forward, holding out her hand. "Put that gun away, George. Don't you remember me?"

George Parker was indeed an old man, though perhaps the long years of running the health camp had helped preserve him. His grizzled features and firm snarl of a voice would have been his own best advertisement if he were still in business. In that moment, Dave Breeze doubted if even a steel knitting needle could have penetrated the thick and leathery folds of flesh at his throat.

"Who's he?" Parker asked with the same sort of snarl, indicating Breeze's bare stomach with his shotgun.

"Dave Breeze. You remember, don't you?" She shot a sideways glance at Breeze as she spoke. "The accident on the lake."

"Yes," the old man agreed, a bit uncertainly. "I remember. You haven't been around."

"No," Dave Breeze said, stand-



ing his ground. Clad only in bathing trunks, he somehow felt particularly vulnerable to this man with the gun.

But finally the shotgun lowered until it was pointing at the dusty floor.

"What do you two want?" he asked.

"A man was killed yesterday," Breeze began.

The old head nodded. "Sam McGill. I heard about it on my radio."

"Did you know him?"

"Knew him a little. Knew his brother better."

"His brother Harry, the one who died in the accident?"

"That's right." The old man was remembering now, and talking. "I was down there the night of the accident, when they were dragging for the bodies. I remember Sam's face when they pulled his brother's body in. The other fellow, Ray Winton, worked for me here. The gang of them always hung around the play. Ray didn't have any family, except me, I guess. I waited all night for them to find his body. They never did, though."

"I'm sorry," Dave Breeze said. "It was an accident."

"You been in prison for it. I guess you paid for your mistake."

"I guess I did. I don't intend to go back again for a murder I had nothing to do with."

The old man said nothing. He seemed to be thinking. Or listening.

And in the back of Breeze's mind the whole thing was beginning to assume an unreal, even bizarre, quality. It had started when he stepped off the bus the previous afternoon and found an unknown dead man waiting to meet him. The thing was tangled too tightly with that other night, when he'd caused the deaths of two men—two other men he didn't even know. He could still remember Ruth screaming in his ear, and the vague outlines of the impact, and the sounds of people drowning. Unaided.

Harry McGill and Ray Winton.

How could he ever have forgotten their names?

"We thought you might be able to help," Ruth was saying.

"I don't know anything about the murder, if that's what you mean."

"Did you ever hear of a Mr. George?" Dave Breeze asked him.

"No. Except me. Kids used to call me that years ago."

"Did you write me, get me to come here?"

The old man shook his head. "Why would I do that?"

Dave Breeze thought he was telling the truth. There was nothing more to be learned among these musty buildings on such a morning.

"Thanks," he said and then to Ruth, "Come on, let's go."

Old George Parker watched them from his doorway as they made their way back down to the boat. If there was any way of knowing his thoughts, Breeze wasn't expert enough to know what it was. Once on the water, he settled back uneasily as Ruth gunned the boat into life and headed back across the narrow arm of the bay. He tried to pick out the spot where the accident had happened, those many years ago, but he couldn't remember, if he'd ever known.

It had been night then, and all things are different in the dark.

Back at the house, brooding under the heat of the morning sun, they found Angela Quinn awaiting them with the day's mail and a folded newspaper.

"The police were here again," she said. "This time they were looking for you, Dave."

"What did you tell them?"

"That the two of you were off swimming."

"Did they ask anything about me?" Ruth wanted to know.

"Only if you'd seen Sam lately."

"I hope you told them the truth, that he came to this house to see you and not me."

"Don't talk to me that way, Ruth! I'm still your mother."

"Go back to your knitting," Ruth said, taking the mail and walking toward the house. Dave Breeze followed, rather than remain in awkward contact with Mrs. Quinn.

But as Ruth reached the grassy lawn she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. She was staring at an envelope, at a typed address that seemed to freeze her with terror.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. A bill, I guess."

"It doesn't look like a bill."

"Forget it, Dave. It doesn't concern you."

And then he knew. The typed address in the exact center of the squarish envelope — like his own letter from Mr. George. But how did she know? She hadn't seen his envelope, only the letter.

"Give me that, Ruth!" He snatched it away from her and tore the envelope open, almost fearing what he would find, knowing already that this was not her first message from Mr. George.

Ruth: The usual amount in the locker today, or I tell the police. Breeze is here now. I'm not fooling.

It was signed *Mr. George*.

"Damn you!" she shouted. "Damn you!" She turned and ran into the house, and Breeze followed.

"Ruth! Where are you?"

He heard her footsteps hastily in the hallway, and knew she was running toward the little sitting room where they'd always gone. "Ruth!"

"Don't come in, Dave. Go away. Go away."

She was leaning with her forehead against the cool glass of the window, sobbing softly.

"Do you want to tell me?" he asked.

"Go away!"

"I don't think you have to, really. I think I can tell you now, Ruth. For the first time in five years I guess I understand everything."

The room hadn't changed, but they had. They were two different people now, crouched nearly naked in their bathing suits, the letter on the floor between them. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her to him.

"He's been blackmailing you, hasn't he?" Breeze asked.

Her answer was a dry sob that shook her slim body.

"He's been blackmailing you because you were driving the boat the night of the accident, not me."

"What is it?" she asked, more to herself than to him. "What is this

life, that everything can be shattered in an instant?"

"How long have you been paying him money?"

"I don't know. Years, I guess. Since right after you went to jail." She looked at him then, as if seeing him for the first time. "How did you know about it?"

"I should have known five years ago, I guess. I never remembered the thing clearly, but I did remember your voice screaming into my right ear just at the moment of impact. I was drunk—we both were—and I must have taken the wheel from you then, just after the crash. But if you were on my right, you were driving when it happened, not me. The boat you've got now is just like the other one, and it has the controls and steering wheel on the right."

"Yes," Ruth said. "I hit them, and then you took the wheel and we drove away while they were drowning. You were as guilty as I was, Dave, and when I saw you couldn't remember it all, I decided to say nothing. Why should I have?"

Why, indeed? He sighed, wishing he had a cigarette or a drink. "When did the first letter come?"

"A few months after your trial. It asked for five hundred dollars or the sender said he'd tell the police I was driving the boat. By that time you were in prison, and I knew it would have gone bad with me in a courtroom."

"That's probably why he waited

till after my trial to start the blackmail. The notes were all signed *Mr. George?*" She nodded. "And you paid him?"

She nodded again. "I have a little money, from my father, as you know. I put the money in a locker at the bus station, exactly as he told me to. I was scared stiff."

"How long before the next letter?"

"About two or three months. This time he only wanted three hundred. I gave it to him again, but I put a note with it threatening to tell the police if he asked for more. It must have scared him for a while, because it was over six months before he wrote again."

"Did you go to the police then?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't, and he must have known it."

"Was Sam McGill around the house at that time?"

She nodded. "I'd just started going out with him. Afterwards, he became more interested in mother."

"Did you ever tell him, or anybody else, about it?"

"No, not even mother."

"Then how did the blackmailer know you were at the wheel of the boat? Even I didn't know it until today."

"I don't know, Dave. I just know I'm scared. The notes started up again when we learned you'd be getting out of prison. I've been paying Mr. George two hundred dollars a month."

"That's over now."

"Is it? I couldn't stand prison, Dave, even for a few years. Much as I hate her sometimes, I couldn't leave mother alone. Look what happens to her even when I'm around —men like McGill!"

"Do you think George Parker is the blackmailer?"

"I thought so once, a couple of years ago. Now I don't know. I suppose I was hoping it was Sam McGill and that it would be over now."

"He could have mailed the letter before he was killed, but that still leaves his murder unsolved. It's more likely that he knew the blackmailer's identity and was about to reveal him. Did you always leave the money in a locker at the bus station?"

Ruth nodded. "Once I waited across the street for three hours to try and see who it was, but I missed him. You can't see the lockers from the front."

"I know. Like the phone booths."

"What should I do, Dave?"

"We'll put the money in the locker, or pretend to, at least. Only this time I'll be watching who gets it."

"Maybe I should just tell the police everything."

"Then we'd both go to jail, and maybe your mother too. Sam McGill was killed with a steel knitting needle."

She thought about that, and finally she said, "All right. I'll make up an envelope full of blank paper."

And then, "I'm glad you know the truth at last, Dave."

"With luck we'll be through the worst of this by tonight. At least we'll have somebody to turn over to the police."

"I'd better get dressed," she said. "We never did have our swim."

THE TOWN WAS Cape Cod on a summer's afternoon, with lazy year-round residents mingled into the larger mass of summer people. The tourists mostly shopped for souvenirs, the younger ones for six-packs of beer, and over everything hung a measure of slow-motion excitement. Dave Breeze watched them from the front seat of Ruth's car and wondered whether any of them knew or cared about the murder of Sam McGill. They were excited with themselves, with their own little pleasures and problems.

"I put it in the locker," Ruth said, sliding into the seat next to him. "What do we do now?"

"Wait."

They waited.

At five o'clock, just as the bus from Boston was disgorging its load of weekenders, Dave Breeze spotted a familiar figure through the terminal window. "Damn! He came in the back!"

"Who?"

"Old George Parker. We should have known it was him. I'll check the locker to make sure he took the envelope."

The locker was indeed empty, but

already he could see Parker getting into the battered health camp station wagon. He was out the door, running, as it pulled away. Ruth swung her car around the corner and he jumped in before it stopped.

"After him! We've got to catch him!"

But Parker knew the roads even better than Ruth, and before they were out of town he had an increasing lead on them.

"He's heading for the health camp," Ruth said as they turned onto a bumpy dirt road. "This doesn't go anywhere else."

Breeze had an awful startled vision that Ruth could be leading him into a trap of some sort, that she might not even have placed the envelope of carefully clipped newsprint in the locker. But he discarded the thought almost at once, because he had to trust someone, and if not Ruth then whom?

"Stay here," he said as they pulled up behind Parker's station wagon.

"Oh, no! I'm coming with you."

"He may be dangerous," Breeze said, but he didn't argue. He had to get Parker before the old man could arm himself.

They went through the door together, into the musty stillness of the abandoned building. The first thing Dave Breeze saw was the envelope on the floor, and the scattered pieces of cut newspaper around it. Old George Parker sat in a chair facing them, waiting.

He'd be waiting a long time. A

steel knitting needle had been driven through his leathery throat.

"He's dead," Ruth said, "Just like Sam McGill."

"Just like Sam. And the killer must be very close."

They stood there, listening, hearing only their own breathing.

"Dave—"

"Just keep quiet."

"Is it mother? Just tell me that. Is it mother?"

"Who else is there?" he asked, his voice just above a whisper.

There was a noise from the next room, the clatter of an accidentally upset bottle. Dave Breeze headed cautiously for the doorway, and reached it just in time to see a flutter of fabric vanish down the passage to the next building.

"Be careful, Dave."

"We're too close now. I'm going after whoever it is."

There was no need for silence now. He was running, with a panting Ruth close behind. *I'm coming*, he thought. *I'm coming, whoever you are.*

And then, suddenly, in the room where the dusty dumbbells lined the floor, they were facing each other.

"Put it down." Dave Breeze breathed, moving closer. "You've used your last knitting needle."

The needle hissed at him through the air, and Breeze dodged easily, coming up under the arm. Then there was a sudden clatter of dumbbells and his assailant went down,

toppling backward as Dave Breeze aimed a final blow to the jaw.

He stood panting for a moment as Ruth came up behind him, staring down at the collapsed figure on the floor. It was a shoddy bearded man he'd never seen before.

"Who is it?" Ruth breathed behind him.

"The elusive Mr. George, our blackmailer and two-time murderer."

"But who? I don't even know him."

"I assume he's the man who's been secretly living here with Parker all these years. Remember the two rooms in use, the two brands of cigarettes in the ash tray? I always thought this health camp would be a perfect place for a criminal to hide out."

"What criminal?"

"The man who was blackmailing you. He just wanted enough money to live on up here. That's why his demands were relatively small and irregular. Of course, when I got out of prison he decided to tighten the screws a bit more, to latch onto me and get some really big money out of you."

"Why did he kill Sam McGill?"

"Sam must have recognized him while he was waiting for me at the bus station. I made the mistake of thinking it was Sam who was waiting. McGill only recognized him, even through the beard he'd grown to hide behind. I suppose the knitting needles were in Sam's car, left

there some time by your mother. They were the handiest weapon, when this fellow followed McGill back inside and stabbed him while he was phoning the police."

"And Parker?"

"Parker was our killer's friend, but after the first murder they come easy. It was rage at seeing that cut-up newspaper instead of the money he'd sent Parker for, I suppose."

The bearded man stirred and lifted his head.

"I'd better phone for the police," Ruth said. "But you still haven't told me who it is."

"The only person in the world who knew you were behind the wheel of the boat that night, when

even I didn't know it. Consider— who else was there? Who else could have been the blackmailing Mr. George?"

"There was no one else there. We were in the middle of the bay at night."

"The two fishermen were there. They must have seen it all before they went down. Sam McGill's brother and the other one—the one who worked here at the health resort with Parker, whose job would probably have made him a good swimmer, whose body—remember? —was never recovered. I think behind the beard we have the man who didn't die five years ago—Ray Winton."

In the Next Issue—Exclusively Yours—

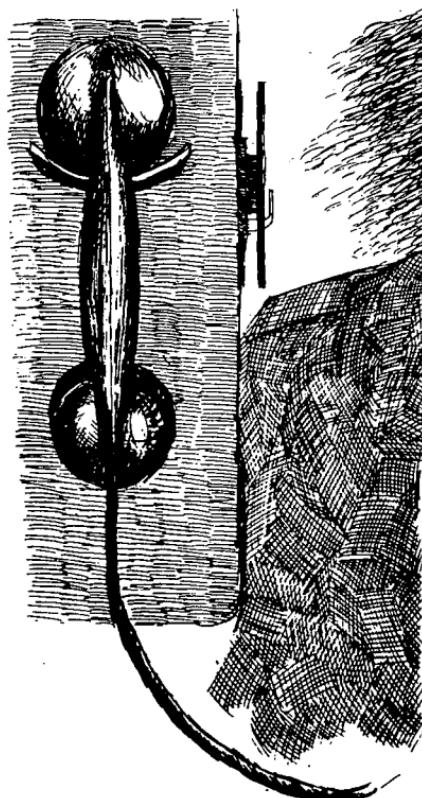
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when you deal a crooked hand in the devil's game, remember—two can play at Murder . . .

BIG JIM'S POCKET

THE APARTMENT HOUSE was shaped like a C, with the open area, snow-covered at the moment, facing the street. The Cotrell apartment was the right front one facing the courtyard on the first floor.

The front room was enormous, with a living room area at one end and a dining area at the other. Between them was a stone fireplace in which a log was always burning this time of year. Across from the

fireplace French doors gave onto the courtyard.

Four people were around the table in the dining area. At the head sat labor king Big Jim Cotrell, national president of the United Truckers' Union of North America. He was a thick-bodied but fatless man in his early fifties with graying hair and the ruthless, yet pleasant, features of a benevolent pirate.

At the other end sat his wife, Glenda, cool and blonde and beautiful and twenty years younger than Big Jim. To her right sat Dr. William Smithers, a tall, sixtyish man with the veined, cadaverous face of an alcoholic. To her left was handsome, thirty-five-year-old Jack Abbot, president of the local United Truckers' Union.

All during dinner Glenda had made a point of not looking at Jack Abbot even once. She was afraid if she did, she would become so moony-eyed her husband would instantly divine that they were carrying on an affair.

Abbot had just expressed worry about the state's threatened investigation of his local's financial condition.

Big Jim said, "It's only a showcase move, Jack. The welfare fund books are the only ones that won't stand public scrutiny, and the attorney general won't push to see them, so long as you let him examine everything else. He wouldn't dare, because I've got too many

people close to the governor in my pocket."

"You've got everybody in your pocket," Doc Smithers said sourly.

Big Jim Cotrell glanced at him.

"Not you, you old soak," he said amiably. "It's the other way around. You won't even let me eat what I want."

"Me either," Glenda said, forcing a smile at the aging doctor. "He allows me twelve hundred calories a day."

"You allow yourself that," the doctor corrected. "Dieting was your idea. I just drew up a menu to meet your specifications. You're not an ounce overweight and you're as healthy as an ox. Far as I'm concerned you can go off your diet any time you want."

"Me too?" Big Jim asked.

Dr. Smithers threw him a sardonic smile. "Sure, chubby, any time your cholesterol count goes down below two-fifty."

"Blasted tyrant," Big Jim growled at him.

The doctor turned back to his hostess. "I'm not on a diet, Glenda. When are you going to serve coffee?"

What he meant was when was he going to get the first of the several coffee royals Glenda always surreptitiously fixed for him when he dined at their apartment. As usual he hadn't touched the wine served with dinner, but he had downed three Manhattans beforehand and would have at least three coffee roy-

als afterward. He rarely drank anything that didn't have whisky in it.

"Right now," Glenda said, rising and going into the kitchen.

She didn't particularly like Doc Smithers, but she had to pretend to because he was one of her husband's oldest and closest friends. Probably the man would long ago have drunk himself entirely out of the medical profession if Big Jim hadn't arranged for him to be retained by the local union to make insurance examinations and to appear before the workmen's compensation board on behalf of union members with claims for on-the-job injuries. He also acted as family physician for a few top union officials, but otherwise had no practice.

Glenda returned with four cups of coffee on a tray, only one of which had whiskey in it. When Doc Smithers dined with them, she always served it that way instead of bringing out the pot, because he was a little sensitive about being the only one drinking. Big Jim knew what was going on, but at least their guests remained unaware of how much the doctor drank.

About eight-thirty, while Doc Smithers was on his third coffee royal, Jack Abbot announced that he had better leave because he had to do some final boning up for a nine o'clock contract negotiation meeting the next morning. Glenda walked to the door with him.

There was a small entry hall that put them out of sight of the men

still at the table. Glenda slipped her arms about Abbot's neck and gave him a quick but passionate kiss.

"When?" she asked in a low voice.

"Tomorrow night about nine?" he inquired.

"I can manage that," she said. "It's symphony night, and he'll be pleased if I offer to go alone."

Promptly at nine the next evening she arrived at Jack Abbot's bachelor apartment. The moment the door closed behind her, they fell into each other's arms. It was considerably later before they got around to having any conversation. When they did, it was the same old subject.

"We've got to tell him," Abbot said. "I can't stand this sneaking any more."

She let out a long suffering sigh. "I keep telling you he would ruin you, honey. You don't know how vindictive he can be. You must realize he'd have you kicked out as president of the local. He might even have both of us killed."

"Aw, come on."

Sitting up, she looked down at him. "You don't think he'd be capable of that? Well, for your information, I'm almost sure he arranged the murder of Barney Quinn when Quinn was running against him for national president two years back."

Abbot cocked an eyebrow at her. "So what else is new?"

She stared at him. "He did have him killed?"

"How would I know?" he asked. "I'm just agreeing that it was likely. Big Jim didn't confess anything to me."

"Oh. Well, furthermore, you know how he's always talking about having people in his pocket? One of them happens to be Tony Spinelli. Tony owes him plenty for pressuring the D.A. into quashing his investigation of the local loan-shark racket. If Jim asked him to have us killed, I'm sure Tony would oblige."

"No doubt," Abbot said dryly. "But Big Jim would never give a hood like Spinelli that kind of hold on him. He arranges his own hits and keeps it in the union family."

"Hits? You mean there's been more than one?"

"I don't really know about any. But I know how to add. I was pretty sure Big Jim had fingered Quinn when it happened, and there have been a couple of other convenient deaths. Ollie Tate, for instance, when he started babbling to the attorney general about the union's double set of books. Big Jim used me to get the gun in that case."

"What do you mean, get the gun?"

"Whenever he's pulling anything fancy, Big Jim divides up the chores so that nobody knows enough to get him in trouble, even if somebody gets busted by the cops. My only job was to get a gun and leave it in a bus terminal locker. Who picked it up, I haven't the faintest idea. What it was supposed to be

used for, I wasn't supposed to know either. I figured that out a couple of days later, when I read about Tate being found in the river.

"The guy who picked it up could not have tied Big Jim to it even if he got busted. And the hit itself was probably arranged through a series of middlemen, none of whom could finger anyone but their immediate



contact, and who weren't the type to talk anyway. Big Jim plays that kind of stuff real cozy."

She said, "If you know all that about him, what makes you think he wouldn't have us killed?"

"It's not the same thing. That was union business. I just don't think he'd have anybody hit for personal reasons."

"You don't think it?" she said on a high note. "Well, for your information, I'm scared silly of him. Up to now I was just afraid he might have us killed. But now that we've had this little talk, I'm sure of it."

"Cut it out," he said. "You're talking me into believing it too."

"I hope so because I know he would have us killed now. Oh, Jack, what are we going to do?"

Abbot made no answer, merely frowning thoughtfully at the ceiling. Finally Glenda lay down again and put her head on his shoulder.

Presently he said, "You're always talking about what a ruthless guy Big Jim is. He had to be, of course to get where he is. But you don't get to be president of a local by my age either if you're soft."

"I never said you were soft, honey."

"I know how to play rough too. You really think Jim would have us scragged if he found out?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Then it seems to me we have only two choices. Break this up or scrag him first."

Glenda sat up again and looked down at him from widened eyes.

"It would really be self-defense, wouldn't it?" she breathed. "You couldn't call it murder."

"The cops could," he said sardonically. "But I take it you're willing to go along."

"Who could you get to do it? Spinelli would never arrange a hit on Jim."

Abbot frowned up at her. "Even if he would, I wouldn't give a hood like Spinelli that kind of hold on me either. I'll handle it myself."

"Oh, Jack! How?"

"I haven't worked that out yet," he said irritably. "I just decided

about five seconds ago. Give me time to think."

She lay down again and remained quiet while he thought.

Eventually he said, "The first automatic suspect when a husband is murdered is his wife. We'll have to play it so the cops can't possibly suspect you."

"You mean you'll arrange me an alibi?"

"It has to be better than that. I think I'll pull it in front of a witness. Then they can't suspect you of pulling the trigger."

"How could you do that?" she asked worriedly. "Wouldn't the witness tell that it was you?"

"I don't plan to let my face hang out. I'll wear a stocking mask. Let me think some more."

There was another long period of silence before Abbot said, "I just had a pretty good idea, but it involves you being present too. Only as a witness. You wouldn't have to do anything, and the cops couldn't tie you in even if something went wrong. Are you up to that?"

"You mean I'd have to watch him die?"

"Uh-huh."

It was her turn to be silent. Finally she said in a low voice, "If it's necessary. I'll do anything you want, if it's going to be safer for you."

"Good. You have old Doc Smithers for dinner just about every Sunday evening, don't you?"

"What do you mean, just about? He never misses."

He gave a satisfied nod. "Do you usually have other guests too?"

"Sometimes, sometimes not. Why?"

"Because I want to pick a time when he's the only guest. If I waited until about eight-thirty, he would still be sober enough to make an acceptable witness, but too drunk to give an accurate description of my height and weight. If you described the killer as slim and slight of build, Doc probably would go along, which would put me in the clear.

"Big Jim's made enough enemies over the years so that the cops wouldn't necessarily look my way even if the two of you described me accurately, but it will be safer if they start looking for somebody half my size."

"You mean you plan to do it right in the apartment?" Glenda asked with a touch of alarm.

"Can you think of a better place? It's the only palce where we can be sure the only witness aside from you will be half drunk."

"How would you do it?"

"Just step in through the French doors from the courtyard and shoot him. If they're locked, I'll break the pane next to the lock with my gun. I can have you all covered before anyone can react enough even to rise from a chair. Afterward I'll just walk out the front door."

"If I wear a hat and a topcoat with the collar turned up, and keep my head down, I doubt that anyone who saw me would notice my stock-

ing mask unless he was right in front of me. It wouldn't much matter anyway, because it will be a heisted car I have parked out front, and even if a witness takes down the license number, it won't lead the cops anywhere."

Glenda said, "But there would be a third witness who was able to give a more accurate description of your height and weight."

After thinking this over, he said, "Witnesses to the same crime often vary tremendously in their descriptions of suspects. Cops are used to that. If there was only one witness who disagreed with you and Doc, they'd be inclined to accept your description."

"Wouldn't the sound of the shot make people look out their windows? And even bring them out into the hall? What if a dozen other witnesses saw you?"

Abbot thought some more, frowning at the ceiling. Then his expression cleared. "We can solve that problem by using a silencer."

"Oh." After a moment she asked, "Do you have one?"

"Of course not. It's illegal to own one. I know where to get one, though. I'll need a gun, too. I have a couple, but I'm not about to use one of my own. We'll pull this the way the professionals do, with an unregistered gun that goes into the river after the hit."

"Where will you get it?"

"The same place I bought the gun for your husband that time. A

little creep who runs a pawnshop over on Franklin. One of Tony Spinelli's hoods who I'd done a favor for steered me to him. Arnold Schelp is his name, and he's at Sixth and Franklin."

"Will he sell you a silencer too?"

"He'll sell anything from brass knuckles to Tommy guns, if you can meet his price. And if you know the password, of course."

"The password?"

"He can't sell to just anybody who walks in off the street. It might be an undercover cop. When a customer has the password, he knows he was steered there by somebody safe."

"Oh. What is it?"

"You tell him you were sent by Mr. Moody."

Neither said anything for a time. Then she said, "Your picture has been in the papers a lot. This Schelp man may recognize you. I don't suppose he'd tell the police, but what if he passed on to somebody like Tony Spinelli that you had bought a gun and a silencer just before Jim was shot?"

After thinking about this, Abbot said, "Spinelli wouldn't do anything, but if it got to any of the union officials, I could end up getting hit too. I think we'll cover by letting you make the buy. He wouldn't have the slightest idea who you were, and if you wore a black wig and sunglasses, he'd never be able to identify you later."

"Would he sell to a woman?"

"He'll sell to anybody with the money and the password. He'll quote a price that will make your eyes bug out, but he won't turn you down."

"What will I ask for? I mean what kind of gun?"

"Get a magnum. I'll have only one shot, and a magnum packs enough wallop to down an elephant with one."

"Why will you only have one shot?"

"Because most silencers are only good for one shot, then have to be repacked."

"Oh," she said, surprised. "I never knew that."

"Neither does Hollywood. I saw a TV show the other night where a gangster fired a gun equipped with a silencer three times, and it just went *pop, pop, pop*. When can you get to the pawnshop?"

"Tomorrow. Jim doesn't pay any attention to my daytime activities."

They decided there was no point in discussing when to pull the job until Glenda had obtained the gun and the silencer.

The pawnshop at Sixth and Franklin was a drab, dirty little hole-in-the-wall with dusty glass cases displaying unredeemed items of all sorts. Arnold Schelp turned out to be a drab, dirty little man of about sixty. A bell that tinkled when the door was opened brought him from the back. He looked at Glenda without expression and waited for her to speak.

"I want to buy a gun," she said.

Silently he pointed to a case displaying a number of handguns, a couple of shotguns and a carbine.

After looking over the collection, she asked, "Any of those magnums?"

He shook his head.

"What I wanted was a magnum," she said. "Equipped with a silencer."

Glenda didn't think it possible, but his face became even more expressionless.

"Silencers are illegal," he said.

"Mr. Moody sent me," she told him.

"Oh," he said, relaxing. "Why didn't you say so? Then I suppose you want an unregistered gun?"

She nodded.

"I don't have any unregistered magnums in stock. Or silencers either, for that matter. It will take about a week to get them."

"That's all right," she said.

"You'll have to pay half down. That's two hundred dollars."

She blinked. "You mean the total cost will be four hundred?"

"That's right," he said tonelessly. "You can shop elsewhere if you don't like the price."

"Oh, it's fine," she said hurriedly, opening her purse.

The following Tuesday Glenda returned to the pawnshop, again wearing a black wig and dark sunglasses. She gave the little man the second two hundred dollars and he gave her a long, narrow, paper-wrapped package, heavy for its size.



"The silencer is fixed on it and it's fully loaded," he said. "All you got to do is aim it and pull the trigger."

She locked it in the trunk of her car and delivered it to Jack Abbott's apartment that evening.

They decided to pull the job the coming Sunday evening, providing Doc Smithers was the only dinner guest. The problem was that Big Jim Cotrell had a habit of inviting guests on short notice, and Glenda never knew in advance how many there would be for dinner.

They solved that by devising a

telephone code. When Glenda went to the kitchen to serve dinner, she would dial Abbot's apartment from the wall phone there. Abbot would not answer, but would merely count the rings. If Glenda let it ring only once, that meant Doc Smithers was the only dinner guest. If it rang three times, then stopped, it meant there were other guests, and plans were postponed until the next Sunday.

On Sunday evening no guests other than Doc Smithers appeared. Glenda served the doctor his third Manhattan and her husband his second exactly at seven, then retired to the kitchen to take the dinner from the oven.

The wall phone was out of view of the front room. Lifting the receiver, Glenda dialed Jack Abbot's number, let it ring once and hung up. Then she opened the oven and took out the roast..

Glenda was able to force down very little food, but she drank three glasses of wine. Neither of the men seemed to notice her lack of appetite, and fortunately she wasn't called upon to contribute to the conversation, because her husband and the doctor got on the subject of pro football.

At eight-thirty Doc Smithers was on his third coffee royal when the sound of breaking glass came from the direction of the French doors leading to the courtyard. Everyone looked that way to see a black-

gloved hand thrust through the broken pane to unlatch the door.

Big Jim's reaction was considerably faster than Jack Abbot had prophesied it would be. Bounding to his feet, he ran over to the fireplace and grabbed up the brass fire tongs before the intruder could jerk the door open. A figure in a black raincoat with turned-up collar and a black hat with a wide, turned-down brim stepped into the room. His face was indistinguishable beneath a stocking mask covering his whole head.

Big Jim froze with the fire tongs half raised when the intruder pointed his revolver at him from a dozen feet away. The gun had a long metal tube with holes in it affixed to its end. The man in black pulled the glass-paned door closed behind him and squeezed the trigger.

There was a roar and a blinding flash. The masked man staggered backward against the French doors, then pitched forward on his face.

After a startled pause, Big Jim rushed forward with the tongs upraised. They were unnecessary, though. After warily standing over the motionless figure for some moments with the fire tongs raised to brain him if he moved, Big Jim toed the intruder over on his back.

The man's right hand was a mangled mess. There was also an oozing hole in the center of his forehead, where a fragment of the exploding gun had lodged.

In a calm voice Big Jim said,

"Guess he's dead, but you better take a look at him anyway, Doc."

Glenda fainted.

The homicide officer who made the investigation was a tall, sad-looking man who introduced himself as Sergeant Carl Tillman. Glenda had been revived by the time he arrived, but no one had made any attempt to remove the stocking mask from the face of the would-be assassin. When the sergeant pulled it off and the dead face of Jack Abbot was revealed, Doc Smithers and Big Jim both looked astonished.

Glenda fainted again.

When Glenda woke up the second time, coughing at the fumes of spirits of ammonia from a bottle being held to her nose by Doc Smithers, she found herself lying on the sofa.

"You all right?" Big Jim asked solicitously.

"Yes," she said in a faint voice. "I think I'll just lie here until you get him out of there, though, if nobody minds."

"Sure, Mrs. Cotrell," the sergeant said, also in a solicitous voice. He turned to Big Jim. "I gathered from the general reaction that all of you know who the dead man was."

Big Jim nodded. "He's been a guest in this house dozens of times. He was Jack Abbot, president of the United Truckers' local."

Sergeant Tillman looked surprised. "What do you think the motive was?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Big Jim ask-

ed. "With me out of the way, he was first in line for the national presidency."

Through her grief at her lover's death Glenda felt a small surge of relief that at least the real murder motive wasn't suspected.

There wasn't a great more to the investigation. Under Sergeant Tillman's instructions a photographer took pictures of the body from various angles and a crime lab man collected all the bits of the burst gun he could find. Then a morgue wagon came for the body and Sergeant Tillman and his men departed.

The sergeant showed up again the next evening at seven-thirty. When he discovered that the Cotrells were still at the dinner table, he apologized for his timing.

"I ate at five-thirty myself," he said. "It never occurred to me you would still be eating."

"It's all right," Big Jim assured him. "Sit at the table with us and have a cup of coffee."

Sergeant Tillman accepted the invitation. There were no other guests that evening, so Big Jim was really the only one eating. Glenda had some food on her plate, but she wasn't touching it. She poured herself a second glass of wine and sipped at it while the sergeant sipped coffee and Big Jim ate.

"Found a heisted car parked in front of the apartment building," Sergeant Tillman said. "Also found Abbot's car in his garage, so he must have left it there. He had this

thing planned like a professional."

"He was an intelligent man, even though he was over-ambitious." Big Jim said.

"Funny think about that gun. The silencer had a steel slug in its core instead of cotton batting. That's why it went off like a bomb. Somebody booby-trapped it."

Glenda stared from the homicide officer to her husband, who went on eating calmly. She downed her whole glass of wine and poured another.

"Any idea where he might have gotten that silencer?" Tillman asked.

Big Jim Cotrell shook his head. "Not the slightest."

The sergeant didn't have much more to say. When he finished his coffee, he told Big Jim he would keep him informed of any developments, and departed.

Big Jim walked him to the door. When he returned to the table, Glenda asked if he were ready for some more coffee. He said yes and she rose to go to the kitchen. The wine without food had made her dizzy.

She returned with two cups, set one before her husband and resumed her seat. He hadn't touched his wine, she noted with mild surprise.

"You looked odd when the sergeant said Jack's gun had been booby-trapped," he commented.

She glanced at him, but said nothing.

He said negligently, "Just another guy I have in my pocket."

"Who?" she asked.

"Arnie Schelp."

She stared at him.

"The way you tried to keep from looking at Jack when he had dinner here made it fairly obvious," he said. "You're not much of an actress. So I put a tail on you. When I got the report that you had visited Arnie's pawnshop, I had a little talk with Arnie. I also had Jack's apartment bugged, so I knew how you two planned to work it. I couldn't be sure the exploding gun would kill him, of course, but I knew it would put him out of commission long enough for me to brain him with the fire tongs. Turned out that wasn't necessary, though."

After continuing to stare at him for a long time, she whispered, "Are you going to kill me too?"

"I already have."

"What?"

"I tell him he isn't, but Doc Smithers is really in my pocket too. He's already altered his records to show he's been treating you for the past two years for a serious heart condition. And of course he'll sign the death certificate."

Glenda continued to stare at him.

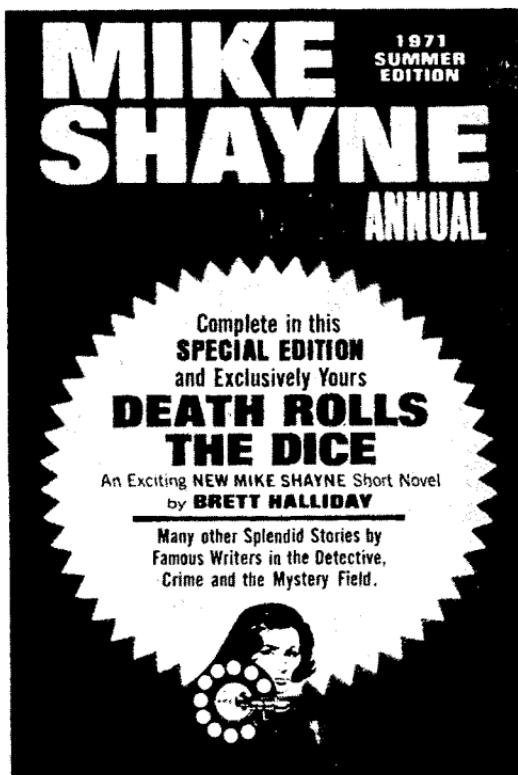
"It was in the wine," Big Jim said.

Suddenly her cheeks began to feel numb.

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*The one man who knew his secret
was dead. And dead men tell no
tales. Or—do they? He shuddered.*



PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY

by

THOMAS N. SCORTIA

ARTEMUS CUTLER had four things to make his life complicated: a highly successful contracting business and a respected role as a community leader, a diabetic wife who loved him dearly in spite of his infidelities, a rapacious mistress, and a blackmailing partner.

Any one of these would have commanded his full attention. The combination was a parlay that even the most energetic man might have difficulty in handling. At length he decided that something would have to be done about it. Since, under the carefully developed facade of community leader and gentle spirit, he was as cynical as a Barbary Coast pirate, he eventually thought in terms of erasure.

He would not have used the word "murder," since this implied a certain degree of drama which he rejected in his life. Instead, Artemus Cutler set out quite methodically to reduce the complications in his life.

The idea first occurred to Cutler on the day the cornerstone of the new city hall was laid. Cutler was sitting in a place of honor next to the mayor, looking out blandly over

all of the smiling spectators, while inside he seethed with rage. In the front row sat Leland Bates, who was the other half of Cutler and Bates, General Contractors.

The sight of the slightly oily face of his partner, lips pursed tightly under pencil-thin mustache, brought Cutler's temper to a boil. It was at this point that the thought came: *I shall have to kill you eventually. It may as well be now.*

With that came the thought of Doris, who was getting fat and losing the rather cheap beauty that had once appealed to him, Doris, whose constant harping on his getting a divorce and marrying her had become more insistent of late. Why not Doris too? It would make life so simple again.

He was getting older and even the vague presence of Sybil, his wife of twenty years, was becoming more comfortable. No problems there with that colorless, drab woman. How nice, how convenient. But Doris—raucous, rapacious, money-hungry Doris. How nice to be rid of her and to be able to go home untrou-

bled, to the unchallenging sanctuary of his home and family.

Yes, Cutler decided, that was what must happen. For his own peace of mind, which was, after all, the most important thing in the world. The idea was most appealing, and he smiled out benignly on the audience as the mayor became rhapsodic over the new city hall, proclaiming its splendors from the squat Doric columns in the neo-classical facade to the plastic-paneled city council rooms.

Very good, Artemus Cutler thought, as the mayor was handed a trowel and the cornerstone was lowered into place. Very good. It was now already a matter of deciding how to do it. He felt better already.

When the ceremony was over and the crowd was breaking up, he paid his respects to the mayor.

"It's a fine building," Cutler said. "You should be proud to have it built during your administration."

"Thank you, Artemus," the mayor said with a broad grin. Then he looked furtively around and said softly, "I hope it lasts until I'm out of office."

Artemus Cutler felt a twinge of annoyance. "Remarks like that aren't very wise. You never know who'll overhear."

"Don't you lecture me," the mayor said without losing his grin. "I'll handle my end. You take care of yours."

"I always have," Artemus Cutler said.

"It's a fine design," the mayor said loudly as a councilman's wife turned to him. "A fine design, Artemus."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Cutler," the woman gushed. "You must be very proud."

"I am," Cutler said. "Believe me, Mrs. Piaseki, this building is going to bring me more pleasure than I thought possible."

"And more . . ." the mayor said *sotto voce* and shepherded Mrs. Piaseki away.

Damned fool, Cutler thought. Trust a windbag like the mayor to say the wrong thing some day.

He made his way through the group on the platform and descended the raw wood steps. As he expected, Leland Bates was waiting at the foot of the stairs for him.

"Not now," he said.

"You can't keep avoiding me," Bates said. He sniffled and rubbed his nose. The weather was hot for a June day and Cutler wondered if anyone ever thought to question Bates about his perpetual cold. But, of course, who could believe that one of the town's leading business men could—

He dismissed the thought with a shrug and said, "I'm not trying to avoid you. I've been pretty busy."

"I bet you have," Bates said with a snicker. He touched his partner on the arm and Cutler drew back. He

rubbed his sleeve as though it had been soiled.

"The dirt rubs off both ways," Bates said. "Anyway, I want my money."

"You'll get it, damn you," Artemus Cutler said.

"You see that I do," Bates said, moving aside. "Or all sorts of dirty little things can happen."

Cutler passed through the throng of well-wishers and started for his car. The sun was blazing hot and he slowed to a more leisurely pace as the faint pains appeared in his left arm.

No need to tempt another angina attack. They had become more frequent of late and he'd been told to slow his work pace. Not that there was any likelihood of real trouble, Dr. Moore had said, "But the angina is a first warning and we don't want you to push yourself into a coronary now, do we?"

He drove from the improvised parking lot, skirting a crane bearing a concrete hod which was used to convey ready-mix to the concrete forms about the construction. His ready-mix, Cutler thought wryly, with all *that* implied.

When he entered Kevin Moore's office, the nurse said, "Go right in, Mr. Cutler; the doctor's been expecting you."

"Artemus," Moore said, "have you ever been in time to an appointment in your life?"

"I'm sorry, Kevin," Cutler said. "I'm only fifteen minutes late."

"Well, never mind," Moore said. "Knowing you, I set your appointment back twenty minutes and you are now actually five minutes early. How does that grab you?"

"I'll remember that," Artemus Cutler said.

"I was afraid you might," Moore said. "Well, we can keep playing the game if we have to. Take off your shirt and undershirt."

While Cutler disrobed, Moore puttered around his desk. He was a florid man, definitely obese. He rubbed at his bald pate constantly and was forever losing things. Artemus Cutler thought him one of the most disorganized men he had ever met and, were it not for their friendship dating from school days, he would probably have chosen another physician.

In spite of Moore's proclivity for keeping aspirin in discarded seconal bottles and antibiotics in boxes labeled "amyl nitrate," he was really quite a good doctor. Cutler often wondered why he didn't poison a few patients, but he always seemed to know where everything was. Right now, however, he was having trouble finding his stethoscope.

"Hah," he announced at last and secured it from under a pile of papers on his desk.

"It's a wonder you got my appendix out last year and not my liver," Cutler said.

"Don't be flip," Moore said. "The liver's much higher up."

He listened to Cutler's heart,

made him hop around on one foot and then listened again.

"Any more angina?" he asked.

"Some."

"You ought to take off weight."

"The pot calling the kettle —" Cutler began.

"Point is, I'm the doctor. Besides, I like being well-upholstered. Wonderful for these winter nights."

"It's summer," Cutler said.

"Air-conditioned offices," Moore said. "Now lie down and rest for ten minutes and then we'll listen again." He pointed at the couch and Cutler lay down on its cool plastic surface. "I'll go next door to see Mrs. Simms and then I'll be right back."

Artemus Cutler lay, wondering at the tight feeling in his chest. He really should have taken off ten pounds he decided, if for no other reason than to show up Moore, who hadn't lost a pound in his life. He looked around the cluttered office, itemizing the scatter of opened bills on the desk, the half-open jar of swabs, the desk drawers forming a skewed series of steps.

Finally, when Moore didn't return, he got up and began to prowl the room. Old magazines . . . back issues of *Science* . . . odds and ends. He looked in the open drawer of the desk and spied a box that said, "Morphine Hydrochloride, U.S.P." Inside were a number of sterile vials of colorless liquid. He wondered if they were truly morphine. Only one of the bottles had a label. It said,

"Morphine Hydrochloride, U.S.P."

A sudden thought hit him and he quickly grabbed two of the bottles and replaced the cover of the box. Then he returned to the couch. When Moore finally returned Cutler was half-dozing and dreaming of trout fishing in Colorado.

"Silly fool, that woman," Moore growled. "She thinks she's pregnant. At her age." He held up a urine sample. "Probably kill the rabbit from the sheer cussedness in that bitch."

"I admire the way you cultivate good doctor-patient relationships," Cutler said wryly.

"It does help make life more gentle and livable," Moore said.

There was little change in his condition, Moore found. He gave Cutler some Meprobamate and an ampule of amyl nitrite "just in case" and shooed him out of the office.

Artemus Cutler caught a quick lunch at Marty's Hofbrau and drove back to the city hall construction.

Pete Yaekel, the foreman of the job, said, "You know, you can't worry the job up, Artemus."

"Not trying to," Cutler said. "Just wanted to make sure those beams were in place and out of sight."

"Don't worry," Yaekel said. "Nobody saw them but a bunch of dumb bohunk workers. We'll start on the facade tomorrow."

Cutler shuddered. "Damned thing is an abomination. Why in hell does

the city council have to have a neoclassical structure?"

"Looks pretty elegant to me," Yaekel said. "Wait 'til we get those columns cast."

Yaekel gestured at a row of six broad circular fiber forms standing before the construction. These would receive reinforcing rods and then concrete would be cast in them to form the squat Doric columns of the hall facade.

Artemus Cutler shuddered again. "God, what I do for money."

Yaekel raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

Artemus Cutler saw that it was nearly four and gave some final scheduling directions. Then he drove back to his office, breathing deeply in the cold blast of air from the conditioner.

He had barely five minutes to wait when his girl announced that a Sergeant Patience was in the outer office.

The sergeant turned out to be a small man, wearing a brightly flowered sport shirt. He said, "Mr. Cutler?"

"I'm rather busy—" Artemus began.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Patience," the man said.

Artemus Cutler smiled.

"Yes," the sergeant said, "it's a good name for a detective . . . and a good quality to have."

"I'm sorry," Cutler said. "That was bad manners."



"Not at all. It's a common enough joke. I'd like to speak with you . . . in private."

"Well, I'm late for an appointment now," Cutler said, consulting his watch.

"It's about Mr. Bates."

"Leland? Surely—"

Sergeant Patience fidgeted for a second.

"Come on, come on, Sergeant; it can't be that bad," Artemus Cutler said.

"Well, sir," the sergeant said, "it's a bit awkward."

"You said this was about my partner?"

"Mr. Bates? Yes, sir." Patience licked his lips. "Well, we picked up a man last night, a pusher, you know."

Oh, oh, Cutler thought, here it comes.

"He wasn't very smart, not a real pro," Patience said. "He kept a list of his steady customers. Mr. Bates was on the list."

"Are you sure?" Cutler asked.

"Yes, sir," Patience said. "Well, my boss wants to find out—discreet-

ly, he said—do you know if Mr. Bates uses the stuff?"

"What are you going to do?" Artemus Cutler asked.

"Well, we don't like to make waves, especially for somebody like Mr. Bates. The feds aren't in on this yet and we thought maybe we could head off some trouble. No use having this kind of publicity about the town."

"What do you want me to do?" Cutler asked.

"Well, we thought you might know if he did use the stuff. Anyway, maybe you can get close to him and explain the problem. If he's willing to take a vacation—you know, go upstate and take the cure—well, there's no point in all this ever coming out."

"What about the pusher?" Cutler asked, savoring the word.

"He won't give any trouble," Patience said. "You understand, this isn't anything unusual, what I'm doing. We do it for a lot of kids around town that get hooked. No use ruining a productive life for something like this if we can get him off the stuff."

"That's very fine of you and the chief," Cutler said, rising. "Very fine indeed." He extended his hand. "Thank you, Sergeant, for your understanding. I'll try my best to help."

"Thank you too, Mr. Cutler," Patience said, reddening. He left and Artemus sank back in his chair, feeling the sudden excitement possess

him. Perfect, a bold stroke of fortune. Only he thought, why the hell does Patience have to wear those gawd-awful sport shirts?

A few minutes later Leland Bates stuck his head in the door and said, "What did the cop want?"

"Nothing. Policeman's benefit," Cutler said. He couldn't keep the distaste out of his voice.

Bates shut the door and leaned against it. "Sure, I love you too, Artie baby," he said, sniffing.

"I've asked you not to call me that," Cutler said.

"You pay your debts and I'll call you 'King Artemus,'" Bates said. His face looked haggard and grey. He would probably kill himself in another year, Cutler thought.

"How much is that habit costing you?" he asked.

"It's what it's costing you, Artie baby," Bates said. "I want my money or we'll start digging up a few of those bodies of yours from their shallow graves."

Artemus Cutler shuddered. "I haven't got that kind of money here. You know that."

"You've got it at home. I know how much green you keep in that wall safe of yours. Getting ready to take off for Brazil when they blow the whistle on you?"

"No one's blowing any whistles," Cutler said.

"I'll come by this evening," Bates said. "I got to have the cash tonight."

"No," Artemus said. "Not my house. Sybil's been ill."

"Tonight, Artie baby," Bates said. He shivered slightly, even though the room was relatively warm.

"At Doris' apartment" Cutler said. "Meet me at Doris' at ten."

"Can you make it earlier?"

"Not before ten," Cutler said. "I don't want you showing up one minute before."

Bates shrugged. "Okay. Just be sure you've got it all."

"You'll get every bit of it," Cutler said, "and that's the last time. Not another cent."

"Sure, Artie baby," Bates grinned and turned to the door. "Ten tonight with bells on," he said and closed the door.

Artemus Cutler found he was shaking in ill-controlled rage. To think he had once liked and trusted the man, trusted him enough to form what had been a lucrative partnership. Then — well, there was the thing with Doris, but he had forgiven even that. Everybody in town had known about it and it was a wonder they'd never connected him and Doris, even to this day.

Then Bates' increasingly erratic behavior, his long absences. The obvious development of the drug habit, only it hadn't been obvious to Cutler until too late. Then the blackmail for small sums and increasingly larger sums. Bates was gambling, too, he knew. He flew down to Vegas every weekend. That was prob-

ably where he'd first picked up the habit.

It was too late in the day to do any constructive work, so he piled several folders into a dispatch case and left for the day. In the Lincoln, he wondered why he had brought work home. He certainly would get nothing done this evening.

Sybil was lying on the chaise lounge in the living room when he entered, her pale face looking unusually drawn against the afternoon light that filtered through the drapes.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, but he knew that she was not.

It pained him to find at this late a date that he was still fond of her and that, within the limits her health now imposed on her, she lived her life for him. It was a pity that they had no children, for that would have made all this complete after tonight.

Just one more day, he thought, one explosion of the old violent energy, and he could come home quietly to her, sit without speaking in the evening, knowing that life was raveling out its thread at a leisurely pace, go to sleep secure in the knowledge that no new menaces would be hatching to endanger his peace of mind with the new dawn. It was the most desirable thing in his life suddenly.

They ate dinner silently, except for an occasional exchange with the maid. She had made him a cherry pie and he ate it with guilty relish,

knowing that sweets were forbidden her. She had almost lost a leg last year from gangrene, a common problem with the advanced diabetic, and now she watched her carbohydrate intake with great care.

While the maid cleared the table and Sybil went into the family room to watch television, he went upstairs to the master suite and opened the medicine cabinet. There he secured one of his wife's disposable hypodermic syringes from a box of twenty. It was a simple plastic device, sealed and pre-sterilized at the factory, so that one needed only to remove it from its package, use it once and then discard it. Then he went upstairs and enjoyed an hour of television with her. Neither of them felt impelled to speak, but Cutler felt a quiet pleasure at the activity.

At eight, he said, "I have to leave on an errand. I'll be back before eleven."

"I may be in bed," she said.

"I'll try not to wake you," he promised and leaned forward to kiss her on the head.

She smiled quietly at him and he left her, sitting in her favorite chair before the set. He drove across town to the small apartment house where Doris lived. He still paid for the rent, but he had not bought her any of those expensive gifts in a long time. She said little about this since she saw a subtle change developing in their relationship. Recently, she had been pressing hard

for the divorce they had so often discussed and he knew it was only a matter of time before she became too adamant and would begin to bring other pressures to bear.

She met him at the door, her eyes wide with pleasure.

"Oh, Artie," she said. "Oh, Artie."

He kissed her perfunctorily and sat on the couch while she made him a drink. She had been rather pretty when he met her five years ago, but, at thirty-one, her figure was beginning to sag in spite of all sorts of mechanical supports, and she wore the beginning of a double chin.

She was still attractive but—Curtis was ashamed of the thought—the bloom he had prized was gone and there was little in her rather vacant head to compensate for this loss.

After she sat on the couch and played a bit with his thinning hair, he said, "Let's go to bed."

"Oh, how nice," she said. "You haven't wanted to do it for weeks."

"I feel in the mood tonight," he said.

They went into the bedroom and he threw open the window to the night air. With the setting of the sun the air had cooled and now there was a faint chill blowing from the river.

"Can't we have the window closed?" she asked.

Doris had undressed and was in bed with the covers up to her chin

as he had planned. He closed the window and came over to the bed. He lay down and pulled the light blanket up around her neck so that her hands were imprisoned under it.

He caressed her lightly and kissed her. She closed her eyes and he positioned the sheet carefully around her neck. Then, taking great care so that his hands did not touch her except through the sheet, he strangled her.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the first touch and then she realized in horror what he was doing. She tried to struggle but his superior weight and the confining blanket were too much. Thrash about as she might, she could not shake him. After a moment or two, she ceased struggling.

He held the pressure for another three minutes, calling forth all of the strength from his middle-aged fingers. They were fingers toughened with hard construction work in his youth and they served him in good stead now. When he relaxed his hold, she was quite dead.

Cutler rose, donned cotton gloves he had brought for the purpose, secured the whiskey glass from which she had served him, washed it carefully and put it in the dishwasher. While the washer went through its cycle, he circled the living and bedrooms, carefully wiping any surface he might have touched.

From his inner pocket, he brought the lead-weighted leather sack he had secured from his car, put it in



his outer coat pocket, and sat down in the living room to wait. He tried to avoid looking into the half-open door of the bedroom.

At ten thirteen, the bell rang. He rose and opened the door for Bates, who came in all grins and nervousness.

"Where's Doris?" he demanded.

"In the bedroom," Cutler said.

"You don't like to waste an evening, do you?" Bates sneered.

"Ask her," Cutler said.

He followed Bates as he crossed the room to the bedroom door. Halfway through the door, Bates saw her sprawled on the bed and said, "What the hell?"

He said nothing more, for Artemus Cutler hit him carefully with the blackjack, making sure that he did not fracture the skull. Bates went down limply, his arms and legs disjointed appendages that seemed to

tally unconnected to his body. After that, Cutler worked swiftly.

He managed to drag Bates across the room to the bed and then, taking each of Doris' limp hands, he raked her long nails across Bates' cheeks until livid scratches appeared. Bates moaned at this and Cutler feared for a moment he might be coming out of it. After this, he upended a table by the wall and placed Bates carefully so that it might appear that he had struck his head against the table in falling.

After that, he rolled up Bates' sleeve, and tried to inject the contents of the bottles he had stolen from Moore's office. This proved somewhat difficult because Bates' upper arm was bruised with several nearly-healed blood clots from bad injections. His veins in the right arm were badly collapsed and Cutler finally had to use the left arm. Even so, the whole operation was rather clumsy.

After it was all over, he leaned back and surveyed his work. He was about to leave when he realized that there would be questions about the lack of fingerprints on Doris' throat. He stripped the cotton gloves from his hands and pulled them over Bates' hands.

By this time, Bates seemed deep in near-coma. He would, Cutler was sure, expire before the two were found. Even if he did not, it would be likely that he would be arrested and convicted of Doris' murder. He surveyed the scene rather sadly be-

fore leaving. Still, it had been worth it, he decided, and shut the door.

On the way home, Cutler had to pull to the curb. The sudden reaction hit him and he felt an intense pain traveling up his left arm and joining the one blossoming in his breast. He fumbled for the ampule Moore had given him and crushed it. The odor of the stuff was almost impossible and he began to feel very dizzy. He sat for ten minutes until the dizziness wore off and the pain dissipated.

Finally he started the Lincoln, drove home, entered the bedroom softly so as not to awaken Sybil and undressed. He marveled at the calm and the ease with which he sank into the deep mattress. He was asleep within minutes.

He slept late and didn't get to the office until ten. There was a message waiting for him from Yaekel. He thought of phoning the foreman, but he decided the drive out after lunch to the construction site would do him good. On the way he savored the morning air without the air conditioner. It was marvelously cool, even at two in the afternoon. For the first time, he realized, he was free, completely free.

He found Yaekel on the scaffolding above the five forms for the Doric columns. Yaekel looked nervous. "I've been hearing rumors," he said.

"What do you mean?" Artemus Cutler asked.

"Friend of mine called me from

city hall. There's a story going around that they're on to us."

"Don't be foolish," Cutler said. "How could that be?"

"It just takes one loose mouth," Jaekel said.

A bell jangled briefly and he picked up the field phone roped to the scaffolding.

"It's for you," he said and started down the scaffolding.

"Cutler here," Artemus said. It was the mayor.

"Artemus," the mayor said. "I think you should know that the police have discovered a great deal of information about our activities."

"That's impossible," he said.

"No, I don't think so," the mayor said. "I can't find out all the details, but it has to do with some papers your partner left in a safe deposit box."

"Well, how could they—" Artemus Cutler began.

"Damn it, man," the mayor said. "Haven't you heard? Bates is dead. Murdered last night."

"Murdered?" Cutler asked.

"That's right. I don't know the details, but the first thing the police did was to get a court order, opening his safe deposit box. They seemed to have a good idea of what they were looking for."

Cutler's heart sank. So quickly—and he thought he had pulled it off well. Of course, Bates would have had the papers in a box. That was the sort of thing you might expect from a blackmailer of his caliber.

But why had they gone to the box so quickly unless they suspected something?

"I'd advise you to say nothing," the mayor said. "We can weather this."

Yes, Artemus Cutler thought, maybe you can weather a malfeasance charge, but that's not for me. For me it will be—

"I'll watch myself," he said. He started to say more when he saw the three police cars draw up in the parking lot.

"I'll talk with you later," he told the mayor and replaced the phone.

So soon, he thought sadly. So soon, so soon. He looked to the other side of the scaffolding and saw several uniformed men talking with Yaekel. They hadn't seen him yet. thank God. But where could he go? His retreat was blocked in both directions, he realized.

His heart was paining him with the sudden excitement and dread. His mind raced and then he had a solution. They hadn't seen him yet, but they thought he was on the scaffolding. If—

It took him but a minute to put the plan into practice. He climbed over the form clumsily. The interior of the form was filled with deformed reinforcing rods, tied together with wire. There was, however, room enough and the wire ties acted as ladder rungs. Carefully he climbed down into the form. It was a tight fit and his body very nearly became wedged several times before he

reached bottom. There he rested, his heart pumping furiously.

He heard men's voices and as they drew near, he recognized Sergeant Patience's muffled voice through the intervening wall of the form. "He must be up there."

"No, sir," another voice said. "Charley's up there and there's no sign of him."

"Well, he can't get far," Patience said. "We'll get him."

"Did he really do it?" somebody else said. "I find it hard to believe."

"He did it all right," Patience said. "The stuff in Bates' safety deposit box gave us the reason."

"But murder. Are you sure?"

"We almost missed it," Patience admitted. "The medical examiner got suspicious though. Diaphragm paralysis, not the sort of thing you expect from an overdose of heroin. Then he spotted the pocket in the arm."

Over the sound of the voices, Cutler heard another sound. For a moment he couldn't identify it and then he realized that it was the screech of cables on a winch.

"I don't get it," the voice said.

Cables? Cutler looked up and against the sky he saw the girdered arm of a crane. The crane rotated across his vision and he saw it was carrying the concrete hod, a bucket

filled with ten yards of liquid cement and sand and rock. Oh, God, he thought. He'd have to yell and tell them.

The hod approached.

"He used an insulin needle," Patience said. "Probably stole it from his wife. She's a diabetic, I understand."

The pain hit him then, agonizing pain that would have doubled him up if his body were not so thoroughly imprisoned by the reinforcing rods. He tried to cry out but no sound came.

The hod poised above the opening of the form.

"An insulin needle is too short," Patience was saying. "You can't reach a vein with it."

The flaps of the hod opened and Artemus Cutler, his brain wreathed with pain, saw yard upon yard of wet concrete descending in a grey cascade. He managed one faint cry before the stuff engulfed him, flowing over his head, around his body and filling his open mouth, gasping for air, with unbreathable lime and rock.

"He had so damn much going for him," Patience was saying.

"Everything," the other man said. "Wealth, position, a real pillar of the community."

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Can you buy your way out of a hopeless marriage? Maybe — if you're willing to pay the price, whatever it is . . .

by LAWRENCE E. ORIN



THE LITTLE MAN in a long gray overcoat stood in the dimly-lighted alley squinting at a number on the envelope he held in his hand. It matched the one on the weather-beaten door in front of him.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened his narrow shoulders and knocked.

A minute went by, then another. The little man was about to turn away and retreat to his automobile

parked around the corner, when the door opened a crack. A round-faced man, dark, with bloodshot eyes and a stubby cigar clenched between strong yellow teeth peered out at him.

"Yeah?" the fat man asked.

"I'm not sure I'm at the right address."

"Maybe you are, and maybe you ain't. Depends on what you want."

"My name's Newcomb, Sidney

Newcomb," the little man said. He held out the envelope. "Sam Rawling sent me. He said you would remember him."

"Rawling?" The fat man hesitated. Then, "Yeah, I guess I remember Mr. Rawling," he said. He opened the door a little wider and stepped back. "Okay. Come on in."

The room, obviously a partitioned-off corner in a warehouse storage area, was bare except for a battered desk and a pair of rickety chairs. A single naked bulb, swinging on a slender cord from a two-by-four ceiling joist, furnished the only light.

The fat man waved his cigar toward one of the chairs. Newcomb sat on the edge, twirling his hat in his two hands. The other chair disappeared beneath the bulky form of his host.

Newcomb cleared his throat. "I don't know what Mr. Rawling said. As you can see, I didn't open the envelope."

"Yeah. I can see you didn't." The fat man kept on reading, his cigar wagging up and down as he mouthed the words to himself. Half a minute later he looked up.

"So you're Newcomb?" he asked.

Newcomb twisted his hat a little faster. "Yes, sir, that's right. I'm Sidney Newcomb, like I told you."

"Well, it says here you're okay. Rawling says you're looking for the same kinda service we gave him."

Newcomb relaxed a little. He shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and fumbled with his lighter.

Finally he accepted a light from a big kitchen-type match the fat man held out for him.

"Thanks," he said. "You see, I have a situation at home much like Mr. Rawling used to, and he thought—that is, *I* thought perhaps—"

"Yeah, I know, don't let it worry you. It's an old story to us around here, and none of our business. There's just one thing we gotta know. Who do you wanna get it, the wife or the girl friend?"

Newcomb squirmed in his chair at the fat man's bluntness. He took a couple of shallow puffs on his cigarette before answering. "Why, Mrs. Newcomb, of course. That's the only—"

"Okay! Okay, it's up to you. Some want it one way; some the other. We couldn't care less. Now, how about the money? You've got it, I suppose?"

"Yes," Newcomb replied, "I'm prepared to pay. Mr. Rawling said he gave you five hundred dollars. Will it be the same in my case?"

"Half a grand's the going price, and satisfaction guaranteed. But it's gotta be cash and in advance, or there's no deal."

"But how do I know you'll—"

"How do you know we'll deliver?" The fat man shifted his cigar to the opposite side of his face. "You don't. You'll just have to trust us. But look at it this way. We've been in business a long time, even though we're in no position to put fancy ads in the papers. We have to depend

on one satisfied customer tellin' another. Rawling put in a good word for us to you, so maybe you'll do the same. See what I mean?"

"Yes, I guess so." Newcomb pulled a wallet from an inside coat pocket and counted out the money.

Five hundred dollars was actually a small price to pay for what it promised to buy—a lifetime of peace and quiet. He hadn't had much of *that* lately, not since Martha had learned about Gloria.

Most wives, Newcomb was sure, would simply have left their husbands upon finding out they were unfaithful. But not Martha! Mrs. Newcomb was having too much pleasure playing the martyr. She'd stuck to her mate, reminding him a dozen times a day about his transgressions.

Over and over again, he'd been hearing how much Martha had sacrificed, how she must be content with those old, out-of-style clothes, how she was ashamed to be seen anywhere respectable. And all because he'd squandered their life savings on that trollop Gloria.

Then, one rainy evening, after being detained at the office, Newcomb had stopped at a little neighborhood bar to fortify himself against the tirade he knew was waiting for him on his arrival home.

There he'd first met Mr. Samuel Rawling. After a few drinks together, the two men were on first-name terms. He'd learned that Sam had at one time been in the same predica-

ment in which he now found himself. But Sam had found a solution to his problem. Newcomb didn't know exactly what that solution was until their third meeting.

By this time Rawling trusted Sidney Newcomb enough to let him in on his secret. Furthermore, he'd furnished his friend with a note to a certain party at a certain address, where he might find the answer to his unpleasant situation.

So here he was, handing over five hundred of his hard-earned dollars to a fat stranger in a dirty white shirt.

"How long will it be before—" Newcomb's voice trailed off.

"The sooner the better." The fat man was carefully folding the bills and stowing them away in a greasy wallet. "No use puttin' it off. I can have our man deliver whenever you say."

Newcomb looked for an ash tray, but found none. He dropped his half-smoked butt to the floor and ground it under his heel.

"I guess you're right," he said. "There's no point in waiting. How about tomorrow? That's Thursday, and Mrs. Newcomb knows I have to work late every Thursday. That way, when I do get home, your man will already have been there, and—"

"Okay. Tomorrow night's fine," the fat man broke in. He started to make notes on the back of the envelope Newcomb had handed him. "We'll need your address. Where do you live?"

Newcomb gave it to him, and the fat man scribbled some more. "And you're sure your wife'll be home tomorrow night? We take enough chances, you know, without havin' to go out twice on the same job."

"Oh; she'll be home, all right. She never goes out. I know that for a fact, for on the nights I've been away I've had her watched, hoping to get something on her, but no such—"

"And you're sure she'll come to the door?" the fat man interrupted again. "She won't be scared, bein' all alone and everything?"

"Martha afraid! She's not afraid of the Devil himself. Don't worry. When your man rings the bell, she'll open the door."

The fat man seemed satisfied. "Okay, I'll set it up for our man to get there just after dark. If any of your nosy neighbors are lookin', all they'll see is a delivery man workin' late."

Newcomb set his hat firmly on his head. "Then I guess everything is taken care of." He got to his feet and edged toward the door.

The fat man didn't get up.

"Good-by, Mr. Newcomb," he said. "I'm sure you'll be satisfied."

"Good-by."

Outside, the daylight was fading fast. A chilling breeze had sprung up, and Newcomb hunched his coat collar a little higher up around his skinny neck as he hurried to his car.

Mr. and Mrs. Newcomb lived in a middle-class neighborhood near

the edge of the city. Thirty minutes after leaving the warehouse area, Newcomb pulled off the quiet, tree-lined street into his driveway. He received his usual frosty greeting from Martha, and they ate their evening meal in almost wordless silence.

They spent a routine session in front of the television set watching their usual favorite programs. For Sidney Newcomb, the hours crept by, and he could hardly keep his mind on the performance of the actors on the flickering screen. How different things would be twenty-four hours from now!

Finally it was their bedtime, and the couple made their way to their respective bedrooms.

Thursday was always a busy day at Newcomb's office. But this Thursday, even with the extra workload, Newcomb found the hours dragging. As he'd told the fat man the evening before, he had to work late to catch up on the paper work.

Finally, well after dark, he was on his way home. He decided to stop and have a short drink at the little tavern, for if all had gone according to plan, Martha wouldn't fuss at him for being a half hour late this night. He rather hoped he'd run into his old friend so he could inform him how things were progressing, but Sam Rawling evidently wasn't in a drinking mood tonight.

Everything appeared as it always had when Newcomb drove up in front of his house. The usual number of lights were on in the usual

rooms. No police cars, with red lights flashing, were parked out front, and there were no curious neighbors milling about.

Newcomb inserted his key in the front door lock and pushed it open. There was a rush of movement, and suddenly Martha threw her arms around him.

"Darling!" she exclaimed, "it's wonderful." She twirled about like an excited schoolgirl, showing off the shimmering sable coat. "I just love it, and I love you too."

Newcomb heaved a sigh of relief. Martha would have no reason to doubt him again, for he'd learned his lesson, and there'd be no more

Glorias. When the man had delivered the reconciliation gift, Newcomb's troubles had ended.

Now all Newcomb would have to do was keep Martha from learning her coat was stolen. It shouldn't be too difficult. Rawling had assured him the people who'd hijacked the furs had removed all identifying marks.

Newcomb looked at his wife in approval. She was more attractive than she'd appeared in more years than he could remember. Well, she should be, for she was parading about in a coat that had been on its way to the most exclusive shop in the city.

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THE FUMIGATOR

by

MATTHEW
MINER

Outcast from one flag . . . traitor to another—with death the final payoff from both. That's the payment for being a double agent. Want it?

THE AIRPORT AT Podgorny was one of the worst places in the world to be during the winter. Winds howled out of the surrounding hills, rain and sleet swept the runways, and it was cold as only the Balkans can get cold.

I stepped from my jet, cursing

the weather, and as I fought my way through the shrieking wind I cursed Nickolai Gouzenko, who would be warm and dry as he waited for me in the passenger building.

The Ministry of State Security had few unwritten rules; standard procedures were down on paper. Yet one unprinted but strictly enforced regulation was that required traveling be done on the worst conveyance available in the dead of night, with no more than an hour's advance warning given the traveler.

This explained why I arrived in Podgorny at four in the morning wearing a light blue summer suit. The flight had been harrowing and sleep impossible, and I was exhausted and shivering as I entered the customs shed.

Gouzenko was lounging against the pale green wall behind the inspection tables, talking to one of the agents. He had aged since we'd last met. More lines drew down his catfish mouth, and his balding head was now shaved.

But the ice-blue diamond glitter of his eyes was still there, though half-lidded with weariness at the moment. He saw me and motioned with his hand to come around the end of the tables.

"So," Gouzenko said. "Good to see you again, Eugen. Have a nice flight?"

I shook his gloved hand without answering. His regulation overcoat looked enviably warm. He smiled slightly, reading my expression.

"Forgive the short notice, Eugen. It couldn't be helped."

"It never can, can it?" I handed the uniformed agent my passport and blue-green identity card. He handed them back after stamping the passport.

"Your equipment arrived on an earlier flight. Now, if you will collect your bags, we will—"

"No need." I cut in, shaking my head. "I was in a restaurant when the courier found me. The hotel was in the opposite direction to the airport, and of course there was no time to return and pack."

I looked down at my rumpled suit. "The courier promised to forward my things tomorrow."

"Ah," Gouzenko said, nodding sympathetically. We started for the street entrance.

"How is Beirut?" he asked.

"Hot."

We walked outside, back into the storm. Near the entrance was an idling, eight-passenger Ziv limousine, which reminded me of the pictures I've seen of pre-war American Packards. The chauffeur came around and opened the back door for us.

"What is the matter here, Nickolai?" I asked as I climbed in. "I have been told nothing."

Gouzenko shrugged noncommittally. "The Resident has a meeting with us at eight-thirty tomorrow morning." He glanced at his watch. "I mean, later on this morning. He will tell you then."

I settled in the comfortable seat. I knew what I would be doing at the embassy—it was always the same thing—but I didn't know why. Yet I didn't try to ask Gouzenko further about this rush assignment; his attitude was clearly that of not saying any more about the subject. So I switched topics, smiling at Gouzenko and saying:

"You've come a long way since Prague."

"I am third secretary here," he answered proudly. "But you, Eugen, you haven't changed at all."

I spread my hands, feeling the warmth of the heater duct under the front seat. "No, I guess not. Perhaps I have learned a little more, but my job is still the same."

Gouzenko leaned back and stared out at the black night. "Eugen Malik," he murmured. "The Fumigator . . ."

I spent the night at the embassy, sleeping in a little bedroom on the second floor. The embassy was a two-century-old townhouse of a duke or prince who had been killed during one or another of the revolutions. It was set back from the cobblestone road by a high concrete wall, iron gates, and an expanse of garden. The mansion housed all five branches—the embassy proper, State Security, the political section, and the commercial and military sections.

Each branch worked independently, having ciphers which were unknown to clerks of the other branch.

es, and reporting to separate headquarters back in the homeland. But all fell under the guidance of the Resident.

The Resident in Podgorny was Georgi Zabotin, of whom I had heard but never met before. A tall, handsome man in his early fifties, he possessed an old-world charm and impeccable manners which made him instantly popular with diplomats' wives.

He had a reputation for being witty and suave and a different kind of ambassador than our country usually posts. When in England he had applied for membership in the Hayes, Middlesex, Angling Club. In America, he had become a fan of their football. He had a way of ingratiating himself with a shy, charming inability to speak foreign languages, but Zabotin was in fact a linguist, and could speak excellent English.

Zabotin was also punctual. He was sitting at his desk, which was a gilt-encrusted monster of the Empire period, when Gouzenko and I entered at eight-thirty. Gouzenko introduced me and the Resident's eyebrows lifted a bit. My suit was both inappropriate and wrinkled, and I was neither fully awake nor shaven. I let Gouzenko explain why. Zabotin ordered tea and we talked of pleasantries until it was served. Then he got down to business.

"Malik," he said, tenting his fingers, "tomorrow night there is to be a very important meeting in room

twelve. Room twelve is our Safe Room."

It was my turn to raise eyebrows. There was a Safe Room in each embassy, and it was there that military and intelligence operations were planned and conducted. Top secret documents, special ciphers, and a separate cash supply were stored there, and security precautions were their heaviest.

Zabotin was not about to tell me with whom he was going to meet in that room, but obviously the person or persons would have to be of Committee level or above. I could hazard a healthy guess that the subject would be espionage and Popular Front revolution plans.

"I sent for you, Malik, because you are the best electronic security man we have in the government. I cannot afford the slightest possibility that any kind of listening device is planted in room twelve, or in the rest of the embassy, for that matter."

"I understand, sir."

"I hope you do. This meeting is so important that I have not even told our own security man that you were coming, and that was the reason for your sudden departure from Beirut. I am sorry for the inconvenience, but I can't impress upon you enough the importance that nothing of this meeting is ever leaked."

"Yes, sir."

"You have until tomorrow morning to completely check out the ~~SEM~~ ~~TOTAL~~ ~~SEM~~ trunks which had followed me all

bassy and grounds, with special emphasis on room twelve. Your equipment is in the anteroom; Gouzenko will show you where."

Zabotin stood, indicating that the meeting was terminated. "Gouzenko will instruct the staff to give you complete cooperation. If you need anything, do not hesitate to call upon him or myself."

"Thank you, sir." I started for the door.

"Malik—"

I turned and saw the cold intemperance in his eyes. "Sir?" I said.

"There have been problems with security leaks, as you are well aware. I can't allow that to happen here. Find those bugs and destroy them."

I nodded, shivering a little. Gouzenko opened the door for me, and as I stepped through, he murmured again, "The Fumigator."

The Safe Room was guarded around the clock, the windows and door locked and steel shuttered. The only key was in the possession of the chief military clerk, who kept it in a special sealed container in the main safe. With all the precautions I couldn't understand how anybody could have bugged the room.

I considered my mission as a matter of over-precaution on the part of Zabotin. Nevertheless, after the clerk had locked me inside, I carefully "fumigated" the room.

Afterward I went over the entire embassy and grounds. My two metal trunks which had followed me all

over the world since I had become a government security expert contained everything I needed for my job, and I used it unsparingly.

I pored over the wiring both visually and with meters, traced piping for signs of extra joints, read distortion patterns and sonics, and when I was done I went back and "fumigated" all over again.

When I finished, it was quite late in the evening. I took a bath and had the valet press my suit, then ate a quick meal and reported to Georgi Zabotin.

"The embassy, sir," I said, "is clean."

"And you found—" He leaned forward, intently.

"A microphone dating from the German occupation, sir. It was in what is now the chart room. Inoperative, of course. Nothing else."

"Nothing?" He almost seemed disappointed. He sat back and placed his hands on the chair arms. "Well, I would rather be sure about such things."

"Yes, sir."

He flipped through a stack of papers and memos beside him. "I received a cable earlier today about you, Malik." He pulled out a pink sheet of newsprint. "Ah, here it is. You are to report to ministry headquarters immediately after completing your job here. You won't be returning to Beirut."

"Yes, sir. Tomorrow I will—"

It was too late. The Resident had already depressed the intercom



switch and was speaking to his secretary. There was a discussion of flights, and then he turned back to me, smiling.

"Good news, Malik. We are booking you through to the capitol tonight, via Zurich. You just have time to pack."

"My bags are not here, sir."

"Yes. I forgot. Well, we will forward them as soon as they arrive, then." He stood and we shook hands. "You did a fine job, I am sure. I will pass on a good word for your file, Malik. Good-by and good luck."

"Thank you, sir."

Gouzenko drove me to the airport. We had one drink and chatted about old times and then my flight was called. I fought my way across

to the plane and was soon airborne, heading for Zurich.

After an hour and a half stop-over there, I was in the air again, and just before daybreak I arrived in the capitol. There was nobody to meet me, so I took a cab through the snow storm to the Majestic, the hotel I stay at when in town. The desk clerk was asleep, and I had to awaken him to register. After I was in my room and my shoes off, I awoke him again to dial the telephone number I wanted.

The number was private, not going through the switchboard of the Ministry proper but to one of the apartments in its rear. The number rang for a while, and then a sleepy voice answered.

"Eugen Malik, Andreyev," I said.

"Good." The voice suddenly took on life. "Where are you?"

"The Majestic, room eighty-four. You want to see me later?"

"No. Now." The line went dead.

I was on my second drink when there was a knock on my door. I opened it and Andreyev stepped into my room. He was a stocky man, with thick brown hair brushed back from a receding hairline and a once-broken nose flat against his pudgy face. He was wearing a grey pinstripe suit and a black tie; I have never seen him in anything else. He let me mix him a drink and then he said:

"You didn't give us much warning."

"No way I could," I replied. "The

courier was with me from the moment he found me in the restaurant. If he had not had to go to the bathroom in the airport, I would not have had the chance to call at all."

Andreyev studied his drink, his lips pursed. Then: "What did you find?"

"Three things. One, that there is going to be a high-level intelligence meeting in the Safe Room tomorrow night. I mean tonight."

"We already know that," he replied a little testily.

"Two, that there weren't any electronic bugs working in the embassy, and three, Zabotin is scared."

Andreyev sipped his drink. "That is the way we want him: scared." He banged his glass down on the table beside him, spilling some of the alcohol. "Damn it, Malik, I know he's the leak. I can feel it."

"Yes, sir."

"Were you successful?"

"I planted four bugs in his office and another half dozen around the embassy, including his bedroom. I used the mikes which look like brass carpet tacks."

Andreyev smiled slightly. "Fine. Now all we have to do is monitor him. If he's our leak—" He let the sentence go unfinished, but he clenched his fist tightly around the glass.

He tossed off the last of the drink. "You've done a fine job at Security, Malik. I'm going to recommend a jump in grade for you and a pay raise."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're at war," Andreyev continued. "We have to stay hard. The sooner we liquidate soft-line subversives like Georgi Zabotin the better it will be for all of us. There isn't a more dangerous or unpleasant task than uncovering traitors, Malik, and you've done your part excellently. The State rewards its heroes."

GOLD WAS WAITING for me at noon the next day. He was reading the morning newspaper and sipping a cup of tea. I slipped in beside him.

"Just got your message," he said, folding the newspaper. "Well?"

That was Gold; never smiling, never a hello or good-by. Just a tall, saturnine man in nondescript clothing.

"I was sent to Podgorny to fumigate the embassy."

"And?"

"I planted ten bugs for State Security. Andreyev believes the resident, Zabotin, is a traitor."

"What else?"

"There is to be an intelligence meeting in the safe room there tonight. I placed another three bugs

in the room, but on a different frequency. You shouldn't have any trouble monitoring both series."

"I'll get our operatives in Podgorny to set up a mobile receiver immediately." He looked at me then, hard, perhaps with concern. I couldn't tell; Gold was not one to show emotion. "Malik, we'll try to keep what we learn a secret, but even so they'll find out there was another leak."

"Security will think it's Zabotin," I said. "It won't matter that nothing will be discovered from the mikes I installed for them. Andreyev is convinced."

"Perhaps. And if Zabotin is taken away? What then? The leaks will continue, and it will only be a matter of time before they discover you are a double agent. Let me arrange for you to get out. A little money and—"

"No!" I stood, cutting him off abruptly. "I must take the risk. A long time ago I had to make that decision, and I haven't changed my mind. It's still worth it."

I hunched my shoulders and walked away from Gold, back out into the cold, snowy day.



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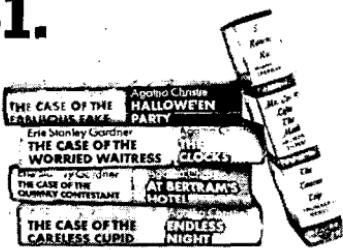
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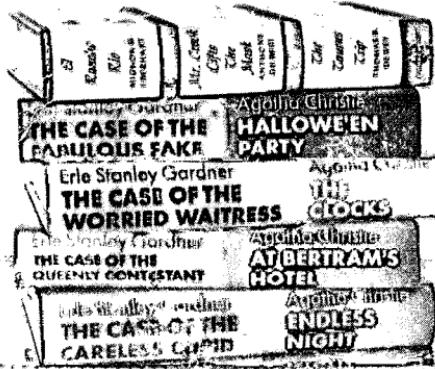
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